Understanding Experiences of Female Survivors of Domestic Violence: Stories of Strength, Resilience, and Mechanisms that Assist in Leaving Violent Relationships

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UNDERSTANDING EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: STORIES OF STRENGTH, RESILIENCE, AND MECHANISMS THAT ASSIST IN LEAVING VIOLENT RELATIONSHIPS

by

Annel Cordero

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY in Psychology

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
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ABSTRACT

Understanding Experiences of Female Survivors of Domestic Violence: Stories of Strength, Resilience, and Mechanisms That Assist in Leaving Violent Relationships

by

Annel Cordero, Doctor of Philosophy

Utah State University, 2014

Major Professor: Renee V. Galliher, Ph.D.
Department: Psychology

Domestic violence (DV) touches the lives of many individuals in close, intimate relationships. Women of all ages, ethnicities, nationalities, and from all walks of life—the poor and the wealthy—demonstrate how widespread this phenomenon is and shed light to the deleterious effects of DV to individuals and society. While current research has demonstrated that progress has been made and is moving away from blaming individuals in abusive situations, few studies have broached this topic using qualitative methodology in order to give voice to women’s stories in hopes of better understanding their lived experiences. The goal of this study was to provide a better understanding of women’s stories and of the mechanisms that assist women in leaving violent relationships by obtaining a complete picture of their relationships from beginning to end. Thus, by gaining more insight into their sources of strength, resilience, and mechanisms that
assisted in the leaving process, we can better assist individuals in abusive relationships. Thirteen women of various ethnicities, socioeconomic status (SES) and educational backgrounds, and ages (19-65 years) who identified as survivors of DV and were no longer in an abusive relationship participated in the study. The study took place in two states and was comprised of two phases: (a) face-to-face interviews and (b) a focus group at each site. Findings from the current study supported six main themes and several subthemes and their respective categories. During the development of their relationships, women described ways in which the abuse escalated over time, the interaction of vulnerabilities with abuser characteristics, and ways in which they survived. During the process of leaving, survivors described strengths, barriers, and ways in which barriers were overcome. After leaving the abuse, survivors described the importance of making meaning of their experience, factors that helped them stay out, and their ability to re-create their lives. Additionally, insight into the roles of community norms/cultural background, faith, and spirituality in their lives was revealed. Finally, survivors’ recommendations/suggestions are noted. Using the participants’ own words, these findings are presented, along with possible implications and suggestions for future research.

(232 pages)
PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Understanding Experiences of Female Survivors of Domestic Violence: Stories of Strength, Resilience, and Mechanisms That Assist in Leaving Violent Relationships

by

Annel Cordero, Doctor of Philosophy

Utah State University, 2014

A qualitative study was conducted in order to better understand domestic violence (DV) survivors’ lived experiences and the mechanisms that assisted them in leaving violent relationships. This method of research enabled me to immerse myself within the work in order to better understand this issue from the perspective of the survivors. Through in-depth interviews and focus groups, women were given the space to have their voices heard. For this project, 13 women from two different states, of diverse ages, sexual orientations, and ethnicities who identified as survivors volunteered to tell their stories. To obtain a complete picture of their experiences, they described their relationships from beginning to their eventual leaving and life after leaving the abuse, thus providing further insight into their sources of strength, resilience, and mechanisms that assisted in the leaving process.

From participants’ stories, key factors in the development of the relationship were identified and their process of leaving was better understood; sources of strength, empowerment, resilience, barriers, and ways in which barriers were overcome were articulated. Additionally, the study yielded suggestions for how to work with individuals who currently experience abuse or are in the process of leaving abusive relationships.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As I reflect on the journey I have taken, I recognize that I was not alone in my efforts to get this far. All these years of formal training are the end product of multiple key sources in my life. These important individuals supported, encouraged, and inspired me to keep moving forward. The roles they have played have been critical to my development both as an individual and as a professional. Karen Disarufino and Dr. Yolanda Evie Garcia helped me envision a different type of future for myself. To Karen, who found me at a time in my young life when I was unable to see beyond my circumstances; thank you for helping me see myself in a different light. Your unconditional love and support helped me realize many dreams and a future I did not think was possible. These written words do not sufficiently express how blessed I was to have crossed paths with you. I miss your presence every day. To Evie, who planted the seed of pursuing a doctoral degree—thank you. I appreciated your mentorship and guiding hand as I learned to navigate the world of graduate school and psychology. You made me feel welcomed, capable, and took time to teach me skills that would be important for my success. I hope someday I can be that type of mentor.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence (DV) afflicts many people in close intimate relationships. The rates of reported intimate partner violence between 1994 and 2010 ranged from 2.1 million victimizations in 1994 to approximately 907,000 in 2010. While a decline is evidenced, between 2001 and 2010 this rate slowed and stabilized while overall rate of violent crime continued to decline (Catalano, 2012). Women are much more likely to suffer physical, sexual, and/or psychological abuse than men (Hart & Rennison, 2003; Mechanic, Weaver, & Resick, 2008). Violence is a risk factor for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health issues, homelessness, physical injury, death, and many other negative outcomes (Herman, 1992; Johnson & Zlotnick, 2009; Nurius et al., 2003). Many women are able to extricate themselves from violent situations and go on to live healthy, “abuse-free” lives. The purpose of this study was to provide a better understanding of women’s stories and of the mechanisms that assist women in leaving violent relationships and to gain understanding about their sources of strength and resilience. Because there has been a lack of input from survivors themselves, this study aimed to qualitatively understand the lived experiences of this population of women, affording survivors of DV the space in which to discuss their individual stories from beginning to end and to share what they determined to be important in promoting leaving behavior.

Qualitative methods of research are characterized by the researcher’s immersion within the work in order to understand a topic from the perspective of the population it
involves. Data gathered through engagement in fieldwork and via in-depth interviews invariably privileges participants’ perspectives and voices (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005; Ospina, 2004). To understand these experiences, the qualitative researcher owns and is reflective about his or her own voice and perspective; disclosing assumptions, values, and beliefs that may assist or hinder the study (Patton, 2002; Watt, 2007). Questions in qualitative research are broad and ask for an exploration of the central phenomenon or concept in a study, thus giving greater depth and nuance of understanding of a phenomenon that is largely unknown (Creswell, 2009). The present study is organized in a manner consistent with a qualitative approach to the study of psychological phenomena.

The Researcher

I have been involved in the field of DV for the past 8 years both as an advocate against DV and as a counselor to women and families living under these circumstances. While I acknowledge that DV has had a personal impact in my life, I recognize that my interest in this field grew from work with survivors of DV. My first professional encounter with DV occurred during “community circle” time, when a fourth-grade student in my classroom shared his weekend experience that consisted of observing his mother being beat by his father. Naturally, I was unsure how to respond to that disclosure, but assured him that our classroom would be a safe place for him to be. This, and other classroom experiences, provided the impetus that led me into the fields of counseling and psychology where I knew I wanted to help individuals in DV situations.
Although my training has provided me with a solid foundation from which to conduct clinical work, training on how to deal specifically with issues of DV were rare or nonexistent. My first “real” DV training came when I began work at an inner city community agency and through attendance at trainings with the state’s coalition against DV. My awareness of the issue grew; however, my understanding of the mechanisms that help women cope with and leave these situations was minimal. Likewise, information about women’s sources of strengths and resilience were lacking in some of the trainings, which impacted my subsequent work with this population. I began to be bothered by the lack of information and sometimes negative assumptions that some community members made about women in these situations. After several years of working in this fashion, I seriously began to question the utility of current interventions utilized when working with DV survivors. My approach in my clinical work stems from a philosophy that focuses on an individual’s potential for growth and development, and emphasizes strength-based and social justice principles. Thus, I began to critically look at available literature and found that much of it lacked inclusion of the voices of DV survivors.

I view myself and identify as a survivor and an advocate. I belong to various marginalized groups in this society (e.g., woman, Latina), which offer me a less-privileged perspective on issues faced by many marginalized peoples. While these experiences have contributed to my development as an individual, I recognize that the privilege of being educated and raised in the U.S. has informed both my worldview and value system, which have been influenced by westernized and feminist perspectives. These perspectives influenced my ideas of women’s roles, social inequalities, and the role
of patriarchy in DV; as such I am aware of the biases, assumptions, feelings, and perspectives I hold with regard to this topic. In keeping with a qualitative approach, this study arose from the need to provide a space where women who have experienced DV could share their stories, where their voices could be heard, and where their lived experiences could be known. While the objective of the study is not to arrive at an intervention, the findings could certainly be useful to intervention developers and practitioners in the field.

**The Study**

Numerous quantitative and qualitative studies have been conducted that examine the impact of DV on women, children, families, and the greater society. Although current research is moving away from victim blaming and shaming, there is a long history of pejorative and dismissive treatment of women victims of DV within both the professional and lay public arenas (Burman, 2003; Davis & Carlson, 1981; Fox & Cook, 2011; Kim & Gray, 2008, Koss, 2000; Stalans & Finn, 2006). Women in DV situations had the responsibility to prove they were victims of violence and were portrayed as having character defects and poor morals (Davis & Carlson, 1981; Thapar-Bjorkert & Morgan, 2010). The stigmatization of victims of DV resulted in a pathology-oriented approach towards abused women that blamed them for the circumstances in which they found themselves (Koss, 2000; Panchanadeswaran & McCloskey, 2007; Worden & Carlson, 2005). Similarly, beliefs that violence, under certain circumstances, is understandable, acceptable, or can be blamed on something else (e.g., when provoked, alcohol or drug
use) further served to perpetuate the belief that ultimately the person being abused is responsible for the assault, especially if they choose to stay in the relationship (Kim & Gray, 2008; Panchanadeswaran & McCloskey, 2007; Thapar-Bjorkert & Morgan, 2010; Worden & Carlson, 2005).

Although terminology varies, DV, also known as domestic abuse, spousal abuse, battering, family violence, intimate partner violence, and interpersonal violence, is best conceptualized as a pattern of behavior that includes the use of or threat of violence and intimidation for the purpose of gaining power and control over another person (Arizona Supreme Court, Family Law Unit, 2001). An alternate definition provided by the National Center for Victims of Crime (2006) described DV as the willful intimidation, assault, battery, sexual assault, or other abusive behavior perpetrated by one partner against another partner in an intimate relationship such as marriage, dating, family, or cohabitation. According to Leisenring (2006), DV went unrecognized as a serious problem in society prior to the 1970s and was viewed as “domestic disturbance” by the justice system and termed “family maladjustment” by social service agencies. This reinforced the view that abused women were responsible for the violence they experienced (Leisenring, 2006), and that intervention on behalf of battered women was inappropriate. Research on this topic has grown and has shed light on the effects of DV on women over the years. Along with clinical issues such as depression and PTSD, women in abusive relationships demonstrate lower self-esteem, negative self-concept, and misrepresentations about themselves, others, and the world (Herman, 1992; Johnson & Zlotnick, 2009; Nurius et al., 2003). In addition to these, the deleterious effects of DV
on families and children have been noted, finding that children exposed to violence often suffer from mental health issues, are at risk for transmitting violent behavior from one generation to the next, and at risk for becoming targets of the abuse as both children and later as adults (Foshee, Bauman, & Linder, 1999; National Coalition Against Domestic Violence [NCADV], n.d.; Parks, Kim, Day, Garza, & Larkby, 2011).

DV clearly impacts individuals and families. At a broader social level DV has also led to high economic impact. According to the 2010 summary of the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Black et al., 2011), nearly 3 in 10 women and 1 in 10 men have experienced rape, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner. The costs associated with medical care, mental health services, and lost productivity (e.g., loss of 32,000 full-time jobs) are substantial. The total cost of DV is estimated at more than $8.3 billion each year, 4.1 billion of which is spent on direct medical and mental health services (Coker, Smith, Bethea, King, & McKeown., 2000; National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2003; Swanberg & Logan, 2005).

The above information is a useful starting point, which can help to understand effects of abuse and trauma. However, there is a continued need for information that clinicians can utilize when working with abused women as they work to help these women survive in or extricate themselves from these situations. The lack of information in the literature leaves many unanswered questions regarding “appropriate” interventions and methods of helping this population of women. Additionally, a clearer understanding of the mechanisms that assist women in leaving violent relationships is lacking in the
research. What are the inner sources of strength and resilience of women who have been able to survive and extricate themselves from these relationships? In addition to strength and resiliency factors, what other factors are at play in leaving behaviors? How might this inform therapeutic interventions and guide service providers as they work with women in abusive relationships? With more questions than answers, there is a strong need for services that focus on and incorporate positive factors (e.g., strength and resilience) in treatment as opposed to taking a pathological approach to women in abusive relationships.

An extensive review of the literature demonstrates that while progress is being made, DV remains a significant social and public health problem (Black et al., 2011). Thus there is a need to hear from survivors themselves in order to better understand their lived experiences. By getting a complete picture of their relationship development from beginning to leaving, my hope is that those of us working with survivors will take a more supportive approach that will empower individuals to live lives free of abuse. Therefore, understanding sources of strength, resilience, and mechanisms that help in the process of leaving is important.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review will briefly present and discuss current research regarding DV, its deleterious effects on individuals and society, and current research on resilience and individual strengths. First, an overview of commonly used terminology and a brief overview of DV is described in addition to a discussion of the most commonly reported types of abuse; distinguishing between common couple violence and patriarchal violence (Johnson, 1995). Second, the review presents information regarding issues of gender, ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic status (SES) in relation to DV. Third, the literature review presents a description of possible risk factors or commonly observed risk markers that may contribute to increase vulnerability. Fourth, discussion about the roles of strength and resilience in the lives of individuals who experienced DV is presented. Finally, the review provides information on predictors, patterns, and challenges found when leaving abusive relationships.

Terminology in Research

As one navigates the plethora of DV literature, it becomes quite evident that there is no consensus or ideal term to use when referring to this issue, resulting in inconsistent definitions used in research (Jewkes, 2002). DV, family violence, interpersonal violence, and intimate partner violence are terms often found to be interchangeable (Corvo & deLara, 2010). Although all four share some commonalities, preferred terminology is often left up to individual researchers to define. According to the 1996 World Health
Organization (WHO) global consultation on violence and health, violence is defined as the intentional use of physical force or power (threatened or actual) against oneself, another person, or against a group or community with high possibility of injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development, or deprivation (WHO, 1996). Likewise, the WHO defines behavior within an intimate relationship causing physical, psychological, or sexual harm as intimate partner violence or DV and acts of interpersonal violence are further categorized as family violence or community violence. The WHO goes on to describe acts of family violence as those committed against children, intimate partners, or the elderly.

It is possible that the use of varied terminology in the literature may stem from the varied frames of reference employed by authors, each with their own belief systems and lenses through which they view the issue. For example from a feminist or socio-cultural perspective the concept of patriarchy comes to play in that patriarchal societies socially sanction the use of domination and control of women by men—resulting in aggression toward women by men (Corvo & deLara, 2010; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005); the unintended consequence of this perspective is that there are those who interpret the focus on male violence toward women as “vilification” of men and that this is largely a male problem. Although we know women may be violent and may even initiate violence, these behaviors may be explained by other issues noted in the literature (e.g., prior victimization, self-defense) that are clearly different from the view that women are property and “less than” men which is often the dominant belief in patriarchal societies (Anderson, 1997; Johnson, 1995; Umberson, Anderson, Glick, & Shapiro, 1998).
Similarly, terminology used to describe women who are in abusive relationships varies in the literature. Women in these situations have begun to be described as “survivors” as opposed to “victims,” which is not without its problems. In the U.S., victim discourse is often utilized for those deemed as deserving of sympathy and reserved for the “morally good” who are harmed through no fault of their own (Leisenring, 2006). In her study, Leisenring focused on the identity work of women, and noted the following common representations of a victim that emerged as most influential to women’s identity work: (a) someone who cannot control the harm they suffer; (b) someone who deserves sympathy or requires some type of action be taken on his/her behalf against the victimizer; (c) someone who is not culpable for her experiences; and (d) someone who is powerless and weak. Although women believed they were wronged, many reject the negative connotations the term “victim” brings. The term “survivor” on the other hand can be seen as the other side of victim and is mostly viewed more positively. It suggests that an individual is able to cope, resist, and has agency and ability for decision-making, recovery, and survival (Dunn, 2005). For the purposes of this study, I will utilize the term *domestic violence* to describe acts of violence against an intimate partner, and will typically use the term *survivor* to describe the women in this study who have had these acts perpetrated against them. When relevant and appropriate the terms *abused individuals/people/persons, the abused* will be utilized when describing individuals experiencing abuse and speaking in more general terms.
Overview of Domestic Violence

DV is a phenomenon that is experienced worldwide. It has been noted to occur across cultures, across all SES levels and gender, and across the life span affecting both the young and the elderly (Band-Winterstein & Eisikovits, 2009; Koenig, Ahmed, Hossain, & Mozumder, 2003a; Morrison, Luchok, Richter, & Parra-Medina, 2006; Umberson et al., 1998). Though men have begun to report that they have been victims of DV, an estimated 85% of those victimized are women and of those, young women between the ages of 16-24 experience the highest rates of DV (Rennison, 2001). Findings suggested that married immigrant women experience higher rates of physical and sexual abuse than nonmarried immigrant women (Dutton, Orloff, & Auguilar-Hass, 2000). Abuse in later life is primarily experienced by women 50 years of age and older (National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life, 2006). Given historical views of women across cultures (e.g., “weak” or “emotional”) it is not surprising that those most at risk for experiencing violent crimes and abuse are female. While DV has sometimes been dismissed as culturally sanctioned behavior in some cultures, Sokoloff and Dupont (2005) emphasized that culture should not be confused with patriarchy when explaining violence against women. Instead the authors suggested that we need to take a closer look at how patriarchy operates differently in different cultures in order to understand what puts women at risk (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005).

Types of Abuse

The literature describes various forms of DV. Relevant to all definitions, however,
control and power are found to be at the center of DV. DV is exercised or carried out via various strategies aimed to maintain power and control in a relationship. Before delving into the various types of abuse, it is important to note that some of the literature also makes a distinction between two forms of couple violence that are known as *common couple violence* and *patriarchal terrorism* (Johnson, 1995). Patriarchal terrorism stems from patriarchal traditions of men’s right to control “their” women via terroristic tactics involving systematic use of violence, economic subordination, threats, and isolation. This pattern of violence is rooted in ideas of male ownership of their female partners. On the other hand, common couple violence is said to be more a product of less gendered causal processes in which conflict may escalate to occasional outbursts of "minor" forms of violence, but rarely escalates into serious, sometimes life-threatening forms of violence that are seen in patriarchal terrorism. It is typical in common couple violence for both partners to engage in aggressive acts (mutual violence), and these types of interactions do not escalate over time, nor do they serve the purpose of domination and control (Johnson, 1995). Johnson asserted that is important to make a distinction between the two forms of couple violence for numerous reasons, especially with regards to the development of intervention strategies and development of theories of interpersonal violence.

The dynamics of power and control are evident in the types of abuse most frequently noted in the literature. Power and control are exercised in a variety of ways, each resulting in harm to the recipient of the abuse (see Figure 1).

*Control* has been defined as a way for the batterer to maintain dominance over the victim (Dedolph, n.d.). It is subtle, pervasive and almost always manipulative (e.g.,
monitoring calls, unexpected home visits to “check” on victim, not allowing freedom of personal appearance and behavior and deciding who the victim has contact with, forcing and encouraging dependency on batterer). The following are ways of maintaining control and power (Dedolph, n.d.):

*Isolation* is the outcome of many abusive behaviors and closely connected with control. It occurs by moving the abused away from support systems and keeping the individual from those who may not reinforce the batterer’s worldview. Initially, the isolative behaviors are construed as possessive love that requires abused people to choose to whom they will dedicate most of their time. Eventually, however, the abused person is
left alone without internal and external resources to change his/her life.

*Physical abuse* consists of any physically aggressive behavior such as hitting, pinching, or pushing. It also includes withholding of physical needs such as interrupting sleep or denying medical help, and indirect physically harmful behavior or threat of physical harm such as injuring, or threatening to injure children, pets, or destruction of property.

*Emotional abuse* is any behavior that exploits another’s vulnerabilities, insecurity, or character. These behaviors include continuous degradation, intimidation, manipulation, or control of another. It can include insults or criticisms that undermine self-confidence, threats to kill the victim, self, or both, and using reality distorting statements or behaviors that create confusion or insecurity such as making the victim feel “crazy” by stating untrue facts as truth.

*Verbal abuse* consists of language used to denigrate, embarrass, or threaten the victim such as name calling, yelling, rampaging, telling victim he/she is undesirable, and threats to hurt loved ones.

*Sexual abuse* is using sex in an exploitative fashion or forcing sex on another person. This can included coercion, guilt, or verbal abuse (e.g., making fun of another’s sexuality).

*Financial abuse* is a way to control through manipulation of financial resources by not allowing the individual access to money or employment, or causing loss of job.

In concert, these types of abuses have direct impact on the abused individual’s overall functioning, self-concept, and self-efficacy. Traditionally, a characteristic
associated with battered women was that they suffered from *learned helplessness*, the feeling of having no control and belief one is unable to escape an unbearable situation (Miller, 2006; Walker, 1984). The concept of learned helplessness has been utilized to explain abused women’s behavior and to explain reasons for staying in abusive relationships (Miller, 2006). According to Miller, learned helplessness was linked with experiences of various types of abuse; abuse which may have begun in childhood. More recent findings by Parks and colleagues (2011) have demonstrated that women with a history of childhood maltreatment, as measured by the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire, were more likely to experience adult violent victimization than were women with no history of childhood maltreatment.

**Gender, Ethnicity, Age, and Socioeconomic Status**

Researchers have noted issues of gender, ethnicity, age, and SES in DV studies over the years. Notably, women are most at risk; however men are beginning to report that they are victims of partner abuse (Catalano, 2012). Reasons for the majority of perpetration by males may be explained by feminist theorists who have identified dominance as an aspect of male gender roles, which socialize boys to value attaining power and control over others, thus encouraging more aggressive behavior in men than women (Sugihara & Warner, 2002). Umberson and colleagues (1998) discussed the notion of difference in personal control and its relationship to gender. They noted that differences exist between men’s and women’s violent acts. For example, given that men are often considered physically stronger, a similar act committed by a woman is likely to
be less damaging that one perpetrated by a man. Likewise, women are more likely to sustain injury and report engaging in violence in an act of self-defense (Umberson et al., 1998).

DV has been found to be prevalent among ethnically and culturally diverse individuals. Studies have shown that immigrant populations of women such as Latino, Bangladeshi, and Arab, and women in other countries such as Spain, Mexico, and Africa, report incidences of DV and are impacted by the harmful effects of abuse (Agoff, Herrera, & Castro, 2005; Koenig et al., 2003b; Kulwicki & Miller, 1999; Plazaola-Castaño, Ruiz-Pérez, Escribà-Agüir, Montero-Piñar, & Vives-Cases, 2011; Shelton & Rianon, 2004; Vidales, 2010; Wright & Benson, 2010). DV is also experienced by women of all ages and may be experienced across the lifespan. A study of older women (Zink, Regan, Jacobson, & Pabst, 2003) contended that this population is largely ignored and as a result, DV remains a hidden phenomenon within this population. From their qualitative data, various themes and reasons for remaining in abusive situations for long periods were discussed by these older women. Themes included psychological/emotional attachments, lack of job skills, children, lack of awareness of what constitutes abuse, health challenges for both, and commitment to stay by the abuser’s side during this time. Additionally, loneliness and fear of loneliness was also a recognized theme in the narratives of the abused older women; these themes are found to be consistent with survivors in general (Zink et al., 2003).

DV impacts women of all SES levels and often contributes to job loss due to abusers’ interference. Abuser tactics have been documented to contribute to reduced job
performance such as absenteeism, tardiness, resignation, and termination (Swanberg & Logan, 2005). Reduced job performance may contribute to instability in employment; making it less likely for individuals experiencing DV to maintain financial stability and more likely to utilize welfare throughout their lifetime as a result (Tolman & Rosen, 2001). In addition to work barriers that are created by abusive partners and harmful effects on women’s physical and psychological well-being, DV may contribute to material hardships, such as homelessness, food insufficiency, and other economic problems (Tolman & Rosen, 2001). Unfortunately, women in these situations find themselves in a difficult predicament, having to decide between staying with an abusive partner and leaving behind sufficient shelter and food. As a result, poor women with children may need to rely on public assistance programs as a safety net from homelessness and hunger when fleeing violent partners (Tolman & Rosen, 2001).

Additionally, severe levels of violence perpetrated against women and children was found to be highest among low income families or with male partners who are unemployed or have lower occupational status (Bassuk, Dawson, & Huntington, 2006).

**Correlates of Domestic Violence**

Along with strengths and resilience, it is important to address risk factors that are commonly noted in the literature. Understanding and having an awareness of these risk factors may help to better understand issues that place individuals in more vulnerable positions to be victimized. In addition to providing an understanding, knowledge of risk factors may prove beneficial to treatment or prevention programs. Although risk factors
may increase the possibility of becoming either a victim or perpetrator of violence, there is not a single factor that can explain why someone is at risk for violence (Rosenberg et al., 2006). Therefore, it is critical to keep in mind that the causes of violence are complex and an interaction of various factors; understanding of this issue will require research in a variety of social contexts (Jewkes, 2002; Rosenberg et al., 2006).

**Common Risk Factors**

Risk factors may be unique to certain types of violence (Rosenberg et al., 2006); however, in the case of DV the following risk factors are found:

Exposure to violence in the home appears to impact individuals, in that they are more vulnerable to future victimization in adulthood or may become perpetrators of abuse. For example, several authors have noted males who have witnessed the abuse of their mothers or have been beaten themselves as children, may in turn go on to abuse their partners because they have learned this is acceptable behavior. Similarly, daughters of women who have been abused or are abused as children are more likely to be abused by their partners as adults than those who were not exposed to abuse, thus the cycle of violence is perpetuated (Jewkes, 2002; Jewkes, Levin, & Penn-Kekana, 2002). Sunday and colleagues (2011) originally sampled 198 adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 who enrolled in a longitudinal study. The actual numbers that were followed for 10 years included 67 abused and 78 nonabused participants. All participants were White middle to lower class, and groups were matched for age, gender, and income. Abused participants were recruited from the New York child registry and had documented cases by child protective services of physical abuse by biological or stepparents. Rates of physical
violence against partners were higher among those who had experienced abuse as adolescents than among those who had non-abusive histories (Sunday et al., 2011). Those with histories of family violence (e.g., witnessing parental violence or experiencing familial physical abuse) tended to utilize verbal aggression and violent tactics to settle conflicts or accepted that violence was a means to resolve problems (Sunday et al., 2011).

Another study of 326 college students (ages 18-25; 219 women, 107 men) who were economically and ethnically diverse asked participants to report witnessing incidences of physical violence between adults in their families and exposure to verbal aggression. Interparental physical and verbal aggression was linked to interpersonal problems, dominance, and symptoms of trauma (Blumenthal, Neeman, & Murphy, 1998).

Since the family appears to be the setting for learning aggressive behaviors and in some situations the source of prominent events that impact development, many studies have looked at the role of childhood emotional abuse, childhood sexual abuse, and childhood attachment to understand abuse in adulthood, thus, risk factors for abuse may be linked to childhood events (Berzenski & Yates, 2010; Henderson, Bartholomew, Trinke, & Kwong, 2005). According to Berzenski and Yates, maltreatment in childhood undermines the development and maintenance of adaptive relationships in both childhood and adulthood. In their study of 2,169 undergraduate students, childhood emotional abuse was found to impact the ability to regulate emotions effectively and was linked to higher levels of violence perpetration and victimization. Additionally, participants who endorsed difficulties in the domain of impulsivity reported higher levels of relationship violence perpetration and victimization. Moreover, childhood sexual abuse showed a similar
pattern of relationships with adult outcomes. While both emotional and sexual abuse predicted both relationship violence perpetration and victimization, Berzenski and Yates found that childhood emotional abuse predicted victimization and perpetration above other factors and was the strongest predictor of relationship violence.

Henderson and colleagues (2005) assessed attachment in order to explain decisions to remain with an abusive partner and to explain how an individual can assault a partner whom he or she claims to love and cannot be without. In their study, they looked at the following four attachment patterns: (a) secure (positive view of self and others), characterized by high self-esteem, ability to establish and maintain intimate bonds without losing a sense of self; (b) fearful (negative view of self and others), characterized by low self-esteem, avoidance of intimacy due to fear of rejection. Fearful attachment results in conflicting attachment needs because the fear is accompanied with desire for social contact and approval; (c) preoccupied (negative view of self and positive view of others), characterized by low self-worth, excessive dependency on other’s love and approval; demanding interpersonal style; and (d) dismissing (positive view of self and negative view of others), characterized by compulsive self-reliance and defensive downplaying of the importance of intimate relationships. Henderson and colleagues noted that women who had been in abusive relationships had attachment patterns in the fearful or preoccupied domains, placing them at risk for returning to an abusive partner because they were more likely to excuse their partner’s abuse. A bonding is said to occur that may explain why they are at risk for staying in these types of relationships. This phenomenon described in the literature is known as traumatic bonding. Traumatic bonding results from
imbalance of power accompanied with intermittent abuse which is offset by positive behaviors (e.g., apologizing, acting lovingly); this further enhances the strength of emotional bonds and attachment to abusive partners (Dutton & Painter, 1993). In Henderson’s study, fearfulness and preoccupation were associated with both the perpetration of abuse and victimization. Specifically, individuals with preoccupied attachment styles are torn between a need for love and support from partners and the fear of not having that need met. This may explain how perpetrators of abuse can harm someone they claim to love. Henderson and colleagues noted that individuals with this attachment style become increasingly demanding and potentially aggressive when they perceive a loss of an attachment figure.

Other risk factors that may be linked to DV victimization, but that do not necessarily occur at the individual level in childhood include bullying, having previously been in a violent relationship, and patriarchal societal/community norms which influence views towards women. As previously mentioned, patriarchal norms and practices have been linked to aggression and violent acts against women. In communities where violence is accepted as a means to resolve issues and where women and their roles are governed by patriarchal laws, the condoning of violence and the perpetuation of violent practices against women are evident (Jewkes, 2002; Jewkes et al., 2002; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). Additionally, economic and financial stressors are other contributors to DV (Jewkes, 2002; Jewkes et al., 2002). One explanation of this is that in countries with low SES or among families with low SES, poverty is inherently stressful and thus fewer resources are available to reduce stress (e.g., lack of education to learn nonviolent
conflict resolution skills).

Another factor associated with risk is immigration status. The literature has shed light on the unique obstacles and struggles faced by immigrant women residing in the U.S. who experience abuse. Earner (2010) pointed out that immigrant women are not only at risk at the hands of their partners but are also at risk of state level sanctions ranging from denial of services or lack of services based on immigration status, to loss of their children at the hands of the child protective system due to perceptions that they failed to protect their children. Additional barriers are lack of translators for those who are limited in English and culturally insensitive interventions (Earner, 2010). Likewise, ethnic minority women in the U.S. and across countries appear to be at higher risk for violence, especially if patriarchal beliefs are strong within the subcultures they inhabit and physical violence by men against women is condoned, reflecting an ideology of male superiority and social inequality (Abasiubong, Abasiattai, Bassey, & Ogunsemi, 2010; Jewkes, 2002; Jeyaseelan et al., 2007; Raiford, Wingood, & Diclemente, 2007).

**Strengths and Resilience**

The role of strengths and resilience in the lives of DV survivors is a topic that is gaining interest in the research literature (Friborg, Barlaug, Martinussen, Rosenvinge, & Hjemdal, 2005). While some victims of crime struggle to put their lives back together and have residual mental health and personal issues, many are able to move beyond their circumstances and go on to rebuild their lives (Hill, 2009). The construct of resilience, as noted in Tedeschi and Kilmer (2005) is best defined as effective coping and adaptation in the face of major life stress. For years, psychology tended to focus on the pathology of
the individual concerned with answering the question, “what is wrong with this person?” Identifying problems, deficits, and other difficulties is a main concern within the field (Tedeschi & Kilmer, 2005). However, it has been recognized in clinical settings that when assets and risks are both assessed, individuals are more likely to experience therapeutic interventions as affirming, empowering, and motivating (Tedeschi & Kilmer, 2005).

Hill (2009) noted various aspects of resilience and strength that help victims of crime move forward with their lives. For example, he described resiliency as a continuum, where each victim has particular strengths and abilities that increase resiliency (for a complete list see Hill, 2009). With this in mind, a few specific types of strengths will be noted here: (a) hardiness/autonomy/self-confidence; refers to having the skills and abilities to create a life one wants (e.g., regaining control) and finding meaning in life; (b) positive personal identity; having a positive view of oneself which can assist in dealing with loss; (c) adaptability; being able to adjust to life’s challenges, an ability to cope, and willingness to adjust in order to make necessary corrections in coping behaviors; (d) ability to experience and manage complex emotions; descriptive of individuals who are better able to face challenging situations and not feel overwhelmed; and (e) repressive coping; characterized as people who tend to avoid negative thoughts, emotions, and memories, emotionally disengage from challenging situations. Likewise, when it comes to issues of individual strength, Hill noted six character strengths that are common across various cultures and settings, which may support victims of crime in moving forward. These strengths include (a) wisdom and knowledge, such as open
mindedness; (b) courage, persistence or integrity; (c) humanity; (d) justice; (e) temperance, forgiveness and self-control and (f) transcendence; hope (Hill, 2009).

Finally, according to Hjemdal and colleagues (2011), empirical evidence indicates consensus on three resilience characteristics that include: (a) individual positive dispositional attributes, such as effective skills, high social maturity, achievement orientation, positive self-concept, and prosocial behavior; (b) family support and coherence; and (c) external support systems outside the family. Resilient individuals are characterized as being more optimistic, emotionally stable, and may view life as meaningful. Resilient families are characterized as more cohesive, giving more emotional support. These families have norms and rules that are clear and share similar values to a greater degree compared to other families. Lastly, resilient individuals often experience social support outside the family in times of crises (Hjemdal et al., 2011).

**Leaving Abusive Relationships: Predictors, Patterns, and Challenges**

Walking away from a relationship can be a painful and difficult choice for anyone. Regardless of the type of relationship (e.g., healthy/unfulfilling, abusive/non-abusive) there are factors that play a role in staying (e.g., commitment, personal values) and factors that contribute to and facilitate the decision to eventually leave the relationship (e.g., unmet needs, support systems). As with most major life choices, leaving a relationship is a process and is likely not immediate, as it may take days, weeks, months, or years to come to a final decision to permanently end the relationship. Individuals in abusive relationships likely share similar values or possibly similar views
about commitment—a fact that is often overlooked from the outside, leading others to question why women stay in abusive relationships. The process of ending an abusive relationship can be described as complex and nonlinear; since it can involve many leaving attempts for various reasons (Karim, 2011); and leaving does not always end the woman’s problems or interactions with her abuser, nor does it guarantee her safety and wellbeing and that of her children (Burman & Chantler, 2005; Koepsell, Kernic, & Holt, 2006; Stahly, 2000).

While much continues to be learned about leaving behavior, research shows us that abused persons may encounter factors that serve as obstacles to leaving abusive relationships (e.g., emotional attachment/commitment, family, lack of financial resources, lack of support/resources, immigration status, internal psychological barriers, fear of retaliation/lack of safety (Bell & Naugle, 2005; Burman, 2003; Burman & Chantler, 2005; Earner, 2010; Henderson et al., 2005; Lacey, 2010; Shurman & Rodriguez, 2006; Tolman & Rosen, 2001; Zink et al., 2003), and yet others that may encourage leaving (presence of children, having social supports, material resources to become independent, internal resources such as confidence and control, increase in emotional abuse, and so forth (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Kim & Gray, 2008). As examples of this complex process, Karim (2011) noted in a study of women with children, those who lacked access to social supports and child care resources had greater difficulty becoming independent from the abusive partner. While having children may add another layer of complexity, children also serve as strong motivators to leave. Oths and Robertson (2007) indicated that women reported the livelihood of their children was a major reason why they left
violent relationships and timed their leaving behavior to coincide with school vacations in order to avoid major disruptions in their children’s lives. While limited resources have been acknowledged as a major barrier, commitment to family can be seen as both an explanation for not leaving and a strong motive for leaving abuse (Lacey, 2010; Oths & Roberston, 2007).

Internal strength, resilience, and spirituality have also been found to contribute to not only surviving abuse, but to leaving behavior as well (Hage, 2006; Potter 2007; Senter & Caldwell, 2002). Hage noted the women in her study highlighted the important roles spirituality and belief in God played in their lives. In addition to these, an internal strength, along with a sense of hope in the future, enabled them to survive and eventually take steps towards leaving and bettering their lives. The women in Potter’s study similarly noted faith and reliance on a higher power gave them strength and eventually enabled them to leave their abusive relationships.

Bell and Naugle (2005) provided behavioral perspectives on staying and leaving behaviors. One view explained the behaviors as products of punishers and reinforcers. For example, if an individual leaves the abusive relationship, she may be punished through the loss of financial stability, housing, friends, and other resources. Likewise, leaving behaviors may be further punished if the abuser engages in increased incidents of violence or possibly other behaviors (stalking, harassing, etc.) toward the abused (Bell & Naugle, 2005). Interestingly, Bell and Naugle noted that although there may be abuse in the relationship, it isn’t until the level of reinforcement is reduced (e.g., decreased affection) and punishment increases (e.g., more emotional abuse) that individuals may be
ready to leave the relationship. This may explain how the emotional attachment is
developed and strengthened during the initial development of the relationship, where
there is minimal or intermittent abuse and an overwhelming amount of affection on part
of the abuser, thus making it difficult to break the bond that is formed. Also noted is the
importance of replacing reinforcers that are lost upon leaving the relationship with
resources like support groups and other services. Koepsell and colleagues (2006) pointed
to this issue, as they found in their study that women who permanently left their abusers
were those who had access to either public or private resources.

In an empirical review of several studies, Anderson and Saunders (2003) also
noted that there may exist several phases to the leaving process, which include multiple
leaving and returning events. These attempts were described as episodes that may afford
individuals opportunities to learn new coping skills. As part of these events, cognitive
and emotional leaving may be involved prior to physically leaving the abuse (Anderson
& Saunders, 2003). Over time, women accrue shifts in thinking, changes in their feelings
towards their abusers, and opportunities to learn effective coping strategies; the iterative
tries at leaving that abused women undergo serve to demonstrate that this is an active
process in which women engage in multiple efforts for survival when dealing with the
abuse and goes against existing myths that women experiencing abuse are passive, self-
defeating, and unlikely to leave (Gortner, Berns, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1997). Several
theories and phases were described (see Anderson & Saunders, 2003) that shed light on
the phenomena of leaving. Included in the phases were the following: (a) managing and
enduring the violence; (b) acknowledgement of the abuse, reframing and counteracting
the abuse; and (c) disengaging, breaking free from abuse and focusing on one’s own needs (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). Activity within these phases may shed light into the amount of energy women put into thinking about and leaving abusive relationships. Additionally, as part of understanding leaving behavior, it is important to consider that leaving may often result in negative consequences.

Oths and Roberston (2007) noted that leaving an abusive partner can be both strenuous and difficult and it can also be a particularly dangerous time for women. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics’ (BJS) National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), women who separated from their abusive partner experience higher rates of intimate partner violence than women who were married or divorced (Catalano, 2012). Similarly, the greatest time for harm or revictimization is once a woman has made the decision to leave (Bybee & Sullivan, 2005; Stahly, 2000). With this in mind the importance of support (e.g., shelters, protection from revictimization, financial assistance, and counseling) is critical at this juncture (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Lacey, 2010; Oths & Robertson, 2007). Additionally important is the understanding that the phenomenon of DV is a complex issue that exists on multiple societal levels that is not easily resolved through separation (Burman & Chantler, 2005; Stahly, 2000).

**Summary and Objectives**

Current research on factors related to strength and resilience in helping women extricate themselves from violent relationships is lacking. Often what is understood about women in these situations comes from research with women currently experiencing
abuse, in shelters, or sources other than women themselves. Understanding mechanisms that help battered women extricate themselves from violent relationships is important for a myriad of reasons. Among them, it may be helpful in informing therapeutic treatments and social support services, possibly for those of diverse backgrounds with regard to ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, and other demographic characteristics. By developing more effective interventions and supports, women in violent relationships may be empowered to leave those situations and make life changes that may have long reaching ripple effects on the lives and future of their children and an impact on society overall. In conjunction with the goal of the study, the following research questions were generated.

RQ1: How do women describe the development of their abusive relationship? What do they see as their own vulnerabilities? What are the characteristics of the abusers? How do these vulnerabilities and abuser characteristics increase risk for abuse?

RQ2: What is the process of leaving? How do women understand the barriers and their resources to support leaving? What are their sources of strength and resilience? How do they describe life after leaving the abusive relationship?

RQ3: How do women understand the roles of culture and background (religious, gender roles, etc.) in their own experiences?
CHAPTER III

METHODS

Design

Qualitative research methods have been shown to assist in exploring the depth and complexity of human experiences (Morrow, 2007). A qualitative methodology was selected for this study for several reasons. First, a qualitative method facilitates my commitment to conducting research that is congruent with paradigms and methods closely related to clinical practice. Second, qualitative methods demonstrate relevance regarding issues of multiculturalism in counseling and psychology, and finally, there is the advantage of enhanced methodological diversification (Morrow, 2007; Ponterotto, 2010).

This present study was conducted utilizing a phenomenological design in order to understand the viewpoints and lived experiences of women who were able to extricate themselves from violent romantic relationships. Through the use of phenomenological research, vital information is gained on how a particular group of individuals experience a phenomena or concept (Creswell, 2009). It provides “rich” descriptions of essential structures, such as characteristics common among the group of individuals in the study (Patton, 2002). In addition to offering descriptions of their experiences and revealing commonalities across individuals, phenomenological research provides the space for individuals to discuss meanings they ascribe to their experiences in their own words (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002). Thus, phenomenological analysis provides the framework
for understanding the experiences central to leaving behaviors.

Qualitative research requires the researcher to become immersed within the research project. It requires that he or she serve a more personal and active role, thus becoming a valuable tool throughout the entire process (Ospina, 2004). Similarly, many aspects of the researcher (e.g., personality, characteristics, training, and perspectives) will have influence throughout the research project; as such researcher reflexivity affords the researcher the opportunity to understand how his or her own lived experiences and understandings of the world affect the research process from beginning to end (Morrow, 2005; Patton, 2002; Watt, 2007). Therefore, these personal differences among researchers contribute to how the research is carried out.

With this understanding in mind, I am aware that the skill set I have, along with the knowledge and experience I possess influences how I interpret information obtained for my analyses. In order to preserve the authenticity of the women’s experiences and accurately allow their voices to be heard, I maintained an ongoing reflexive journal. This enabled me to document personal biases or frustrations, and served as a way to think critically about the project and be reflexive about the study (Watt, 2007). In addition to this a peer debriefer, who is a colleague that is not directly associated with data collection and analyses, was consulted throughout the study in order to maintain credibility and to share frustrations, ideas, and concepts related to the study. A peer debriefer is described as someone who is not an immediate stakeholder in the outcome of a project, but who is a knowledgeable source on the topic (Hail, Hurst, & Camp, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

For this study, Dr. Renee Galliher served as the peer debriefer. She made herself
available as a consultant during data collection and analyses. Several times throughout
the study, I consulted with Dr. Cinthya M. Saavedra, a knowledgeable qualitative
researcher to ensure proper procedures were being followed especially with regards to
peer debriefing. After much discussion, it was determined that Dr. Galliher indeed met
the criteria to serve as peer debriefer for this study. Additionally, concerns, frustrations
(e.g., slow recruitment in one of the locations) and ideas (e.g., focus group activity) were
discussed.

Participants

Participants were 13 women of diverse ages, sexual orientations, and ethnicities
who identified as having once been in an abusive romantic relationship, as characterized
by the DV literature (control, physical, sexual, emotional abuse, etc.). Recruitment
materials (see Appendix A) indicated that participants were required to have been in an
abusive relationship for 3 months or longer, and not be in that or any abusive relationship
currently. The rationale behind this decision was to avoid having women in the study
who were currently in violent relationships and still unable to extricate themselves from
those situations. Since an aim of the study was to find out from women what they identify
as factors that promoted leaving behaviors, it did not serve the purposes of the study to
include women currently experiencing DV. Women who volunteered to participate in the
study used their own subjective criteria to determine if they were living “abuse free”; no
additional criteria were imposed by the researcher. An abuse history screener/
questionnaire developed utilizing questions from “Quiz Pads” available via the National
DV hotline resources was used to determine if participants met the requirements for the study. See Appendix B for a list of screening questions. Thirteen women, all English speaking, were screened—all met the criteria and were eligible to participate in the study.

Written consent, explaining the nature of the study and purpose of the research, was obtained from all participants and all participants were given an opportunity to ask questions about the study (see Appendix C). Participants’ ages ranged from 19-65 years of age. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms for all participants were used. With the exception of one participant who requested I choose a name for her, the remainder of the participants chose their own pseudonyms, with the knowledge that their words would be identified with said pseudonyms. As further efforts to ensure confidentiality, participants were verbally made aware at the time of interviews, should they identify persons, locations, or provide other detailed information that may make them identifiable, these would be removed from transcripts. Additionally, I made the decision to not include transcript information into the final document that I believed would be too revealing and identifying. However, it is important to note that participants were eager and more than willing to have their stories shared, indicating they hoped the research would help others (e.g., therapists, society, survivors, and individuals in current abusive situations). This was evident during both individual and focus group interviews. Finally, participants received modest monetary incentives for participation in the study. Women who participated in individual interviews received $15 upon the completion of the interview. Focus group participants received an additional $10 per hour for their participation.
Demographic Information

Participants completed a demographic information form that assessed age, race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, marital status (see Appendix D). In order to ensure confidentiality of participants, demographic and relationship information is presented in multiple tables. See Table 1 for religious affiliation, occupation, sexual orientation, and community description. Table 2 presents participants’ pseudonyms and describes demographic information that addresses age, race/ethnicity, number of children, and income.

Table 1

**Participant Demographic Information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religious affiliation</td>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Fast food service</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Trauma registrar</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Esthetician</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Project manager</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Production worker</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>DV legal advocate</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Support services coordinator</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Administrative assistant</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: Jehovah’s witness or Christian</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Admin. Coordinator/student</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours worked (for those employed)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Highest level of education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Technical/trade school graduate</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 or more</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>College graduate</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sexual Orientation</td>
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<td>Community grew up in</td>
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<td>Urban</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: Hetero-flexible</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Categories with 0 responses were not included in the table.
Table 2

*Demographic Information Utilizing Pseudonyms (Age, Race, Marital Status, Number of Children, Annual Income)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Racial/ethnic background</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Number of children</th>
<th>Annual income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Unmarried, partnered heterosexually</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>$15,000 or less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>$25,000-$34,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne Marie</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Bi-racial: Native American/White</td>
<td>Unmarried, partnered heterosexually</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>$15,000 or less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lina</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$35,000-$49,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>Caucasian: European</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>$35,000-$49,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hayley</td>
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<td>$35,000-$49,999</td>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Unmarried, partnered heterosexually</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>$15,000-$24,999</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

As part of the screening process, an abuse history questionnaire was created and utilized with each participant as previously mentioned (Appendix B). Table 3 presents relationship history questions asked during this process.

**Recruitment**

For recruitment purposes, it is typically ideal that the principal investigator and
qualitative research team members work together, closely consulting with identified community leaders and gatekeepers in order to develop a plan to identify and recruit potential participants (Mack et al., 2005). As such, several community leaders and representatives from community organizations providing family, youth, and advocacy services were contacted either in person, phone, or via email in order to provide referrals as appropriate. In addition, flyers were posted across campus and in community businesses, to reach potential participants. Recruitment was ongoing in two western states, in locations where the student investigator was a known presence in the field of DV services, until saturation of data collection was achieved.
**Procedure**

**Procedural Overview**

Participants received contact information for the student researcher from referral sources, flyers, or listservs. All of the participants contacted the student researcher by email or phone. Once contact was made a time was scheduled for a brief screening, conducted via phone. At that time, questions from the abuse history screener/questionnaire were asked in order to determine eligibility. Once eligibility was determined, time was provided for participants to ask questions about the study. All questions were answered and an appointment was scheduled to conduct an individual interview. At the time of interviews, consent forms were provided, explained, and any of their questions regarding consent and confidentiality were addressed at that time.

Interviews were audio recorded to maintain accuracy of information. Following the interviews, the researcher and an undergraduate researcher transcribed the interviews, ensuring that all identifying information was de-identified. Transcripts were sent to the participants for member checking. Of the 13 participants 11 received transcripts via email and 1 received a hard copy. Contact was attempted with the remaining participant; however, there was no response. Two focus groups were conducted with participants from two different states. Both groups included four members. Groups lasted 1 and 1.5 hours, respectively. Members who participated in the 1.5 hour group were paid an extra $5 for their time for a total of $15.
Triangulation

The literature encourages triangulation in qualitative research (Berg, 2009). It is defined as a combination of multiple methods or multiple “lines of sight” used to study interconnected phenomena from various angles or perspectives (Berg, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Triangulation enables the researcher to obtain a more substantive picture of reality and is a means of verifying information gathered, thus strengthening the findings of the study (Berg, 2009). More variety obtained among data sources will result in greater richness, breadth, and depth of the data gathered (Morrow, 2005). In this study, triangulation was achieved via focus groups, participant interviews, member checking, peer debriefing, and relevant literature.

Interviews. In depth interviews are common in qualitative research because of their effectiveness in humanizing research problems (Mack et al., 2005). Additionally, in-depth interviews offer participants the opportunity to express themselves in ways rarely afforded to them. Often participants may find it cathartic to discuss their opinions and life experiences and to have someone listen with interest. On the other hand, interviewers are given the privilege of having strangers entrust them with a glimpse into their personal lives (Mack et al., 2005). Interviews were conducted in person with interested participants who meet the requirements of the study. The interviewer took caution to ask questions in a neutral manner while listening attentively to responses, and asking follow-up questions based on those responses. Additionally, the interviewer also took care not to lead participants according to any preconceived notions, and participants were not encouraged to provide particular answers by expressing approval or disapproval of what
the interviewee said (Mack et al., 2005).

These initial interviews were conducted in person, at a private location selected by the participant (e.g., homes, library study rooms, clinic rooms), and were audio recorded and later transcribed to maintain the accuracy of information. Interviews lasted 45 to 80 minutes. Subsequent contact or follow-up was conducted via email or phone. See Appendix E for interview questions.

**Member checking.** Member checking for this study was defined as the opportunity for participants to review the transcripts of their interviews and verify, edit, or expand on the interview material if they desired (Carlson, 2010). For this study, member checking was conducted by emailing or providing a hard copy of the interview transcripts to participants. Participants were given the opportunity to make comments via email to further clarify portions of the interview. Participants were asked to add any comments they felt were important to the interview content, but were not mentioned during the interview. Twelve of thirteen interviews were provided to participants for member checking. One participant did not provide an email and was unreachable by phone.

**Focus groups.** The use of focus groups has several advantages. Focus groups yield large amounts of information over a relatively short period of time. They are also effective for accessing a broad range of views on a specific topic. Finally, they capitalize on communication between research participants in order to generate data (Kitzinger, 1995; Mack et al., 2005). As another source of information, two focus groups were conducted to follow up on themes that emerged from individual interviews. In addition to
clarifying information, new information was obtained that served to give a more complete picture of the research topic. While being audio recorded, participants responded to open-ended questions that required in-depth responses. Additionally, they engaged in an activity that helped explain the shift in their identity from victim to survivor, referred to by many during individual interviews which eventually helped them in their process of leaving. Notes of the discussion were taken as needed.

**Assessment of saturation.** The point in data collection when new data no longer bring additional insights or new relevant information to the research questions is known as data saturation (Mack et al., 2005). At this juncture in the research, the researcher discontinues data collection and ensures that there are no gaps or unexplained phenomena in the data (Saumure & Given, 2008). In this study, saturation was achieved when participant interviews revealed no new and emergent themes (i.e., there appeared to be a consistency of stories and experiences). Interviews were transcribed and reviewed following each interview. This enabled the researcher to identify emergent themes and effectively assess for saturation.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Data Analysis Process

Table 4 includes the methods that were utilized for analyzing and managing data (Glesne, 2006; Heath, Street, & Mills, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Madison, 2005). Data analysis began with conceptual memos, reflexive journal, analytic files, rudimentary coding schemes, and monthly reports. The latter analysis was performed through analytic coding.

Herstories

This results section begins with the title “Herstories” to place women’s voices at the forefront of the conversation. The following results utilize pseudonyms that each participant chose for herself at the beginning of the interview process. Participants’ narratives from individual and group interviews are utilized throughout each theme as they apply. Attention was taken to ensure that all participants were provided the opportunity to use their own words in the sharing of their stories and exact words were transcribed verbatim from audio recordings. Themes were developed from field notes, conceptual memos, through careful analysis of recordings and transcriptions of participants’ experiences, and via ongoing consultation with the peer debriefer. Open-ended questions were asked during the individual interviews and were structured to explore the phenomena from the beginning of the abusive relationship to leaving and living abuse free lives. Similarly, the themes are presented as close as possible in order
### Data Management Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tools</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Field notes</td>
<td>The extensive writing/digital recordings of what transpires during participant observations, interviews, etc.</td>
<td>As often as researcher interacts with participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual memos</td>
<td>Memos that the researcher constructs about generic ideas stemming from a particular events. (e.g., patterns, insights, trends, “aha!” realizations)</td>
<td>Once a week and/or ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflexive journal</td>
<td>Documents personal biases, frustrations, and as ways to think critically about the project and be reflexive about the study.</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytical files</td>
<td>The organization of generic categories such as interview questions, people and places. As experiences and data grow, new files are created. Analytic files allow the researcher to see the whole process as a weaving of the experiences, data, theories, thoughts and subjectivities involved.</td>
<td>Once a week and/or ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rudimentary coding system (RCS)</td>
<td>RCS stems from the analytic files and it is a way to begin to develop rudimentary coding schemes. In this stage, categorization moves from simple coding to more complex coding as the researcher gathers more data and the cycle from memo writing to analytic files to rudimentary coding schemes keeps growing.</td>
<td>Once a week or as analytic files grow to keep the data manageable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly/bi-weekly reporting with Peer Debriefing/chair</td>
<td>In person and phone meetings help to examine systematically where the researcher is and where s/he should consider going. At these meetings the Three P’s: Progress, Problems and Plans were addressed. This helps to review the work succinctly and realistically plan it. This is also a way to reflect on the research process and the data collected, develop new questions, hunches and provide insights into new ways to approach the research.</td>
<td>Weekly/bi-weekly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytic coding</td>
<td>Make connections between the stories, accounts, and interviews. Like-minded pieces are placed together into data clumps and this begins the process of creating an organizational framework; in this organizational framework, the major codes are broken down into numerous subcodes. It is here where the researcher fine-tunes the stories that serve the purpose of the research.</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codebook</td>
<td>A codebook facilitates the developing and working with a code scheme; it is highly personal to the researcher in style and symbols.</td>
<td>Once major codes are detected and subcodes begin to emerge</td>
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from the beginning of the relationship to life out of abuse in order to provide a complete picture. Six main themes within each research section are described, each containing subthemes and various areas or categories within those subthemes.

I began each interview by asking the interviewee to tell me about her relationship. As their stories unfolded, themes emerged and I made note of commonalities across narratives. I begin the results with the first main theme, *Development of the relationship* and have highlighted several subthemes that emerged as participants described relationship experiences from the beginning. These include early relationship history, in too deep, surviving, vulnerabilities, and abuser characteristics. Next, I asked women to describe or explain their decisions in leaving the relationship in the next main theme, *The Leaving Process*, which includes four subthemes (e.g., strengths, barriers) with their respective categories. Another main theme that arose from survivors’ stories was *Life after Leaving*, which includes the subthemes making meaning, staying out, and recreating life. Two themes arose within research question three, Culture-Background and Faith-Spirituality each with their categories. Finally, a section for “Suggestions” was included to reflect the women’s desire to give back, help others, and contribute to those engaging in clinical work with those in abusive situations. Figure 2 provides a graphic representation of the constellation of themes and subthemes.

**Development of Relationship**

As the women discussed their relationship experiences, they provided a clearer picture of how these relationships slowly unfolded from what they thought was a loving relationship to the point that they became manipulated, controlled, and abused.
Figure 2. Herstories: Themes, subthemes, and categories.
Understanding the development of the relationships helps bring awareness to the processes that occur within a relationship that increases the risk for abuse. The following presents occurrences in the early stages of the relationship that contributed to the formation of the initial bond; the subtle nature of initial abusive behaviors that for some escalated in more severe forms of abuse, and the role of women’s survival techniques, their vulnerabilities, and abuser characteristics.

**Early relationship history.** In the beginning stages of relationship formation, women described positive experiences that included “wooing,” charming, fun experiences, and high levels of attention. They were made to feel special at the same time there was gradual intensification of behaviors that abusers utilized to ensure survivors became dependent on them. Vanessa described this early part of the relationship,

Well it started off okay; it started off good of course. And I guess I’ve learned a lot about domestic violence relationships and it started off in what they call the “honeymoon” period. So he wooed me, told me all the good things I wanted to hear about myself and about love; loving me...in the beginning he did all these, he was so nice and gentle and, and he was like, “Oh you’re so beautiful and I can’t believe I met you...and I was just like, “I can’t believe I met this perfect man. Where has he been all my life? Oh my god,” I fell so hard that I...fell so fast.

Of her experience, Natasha said, “It was perfect, he was prince charming…. I would wake up to flowers and coffee and breakfast in bed and it was a fairy tale and it lasted like that for months so I really thought it was real....I thought that’s the way he was.” Selina too, talked of her initial positive experience,

Things went really well and I remember one time writing a list of the things I wanted in a partner and whether or not he provided them for me, then he met almost all of the positive criteria.... I didn’t write negative things like that but all of the positive stuff. He was physically affectionate, verbally affectionate, um he wanted to spend time with me, um a lot of, like interesting to talk to, he was outgoing, he’s pretty extroverted; just those kinds of personality traits.
Tylea talked of fun experiences and initially liking his “bad” streak.

It was really fun in the beginning...I got to the point where it, it became kind of fun for me because he would want to go on these random trips and...he was like, “Hey come with me!” you know and it was, it was fun. It was like living, I guess in the fast lane.…. You know he was the guy I wanted...he went to school, but then he also had that bad streak in him, the “bad” boy. And I liked that.

Many discussed that in retrospect they now know how to identify the “red flags.”

However, because of the lack of awareness at the time about the behaviors their abusers engaged in, these behaviors were not labeled or recognized as abuse. Some described themselves as young, naïve, or ill prepared for engaging in relationships, while others indicated that was the type of life they knew; which left them vulnerable to manipulation by an abusive partner. “I got married very young” Hope said, “You don’t know…. I didn’t have any expectations of what things were supposed to be like.” In her situation Hayley noted,

In some ways he made me feel very special and unique but even in the beginning he made me, there was definitely no physical abuse or any of that but maybe,... looking back on it I didn’t realize at the time that...he did little things in the beginning to kind of get at my self-esteem just a bit.... I didn’t understand that, and I didn’t see that. And in fact now that I think about it, I was only 18.

Thus, behaviors were misinterpreted as loving and positive, rather than laying the foundation for control and manipulation. For example, jealousy and attention was interpreted as caring and love and flattery was seen as interest. As Alice put it,

Now that I know “red flags,” there were a few, but I interpreted, jealousy and stalking into, um, love; that he loves me so much. I came from a very, very, quiet peaceful home. Never saw domestic violence, never even heard the word domestic violence. I’m sure people had it in their houses but nobody used to talk about it. You know? It was kept quiet and my family never, you know, saw domestic violence. Never knew anything about it.

Carolyn and Natalie noted similar experiences. Natalie said, “First I was like, ‘oh,
he just cares about me.’ Just wants to know who I’m talking to.” Carolyn shared, “He started isolating me you know and it was odd that I can’t drive down to the corner store... ‘Come on I’ll take you,’... And it was that...it felt good in a way because it felt like ‘oh he loves me’ and he wants to you know he wants the best for me, but when I look back you know now I understand that it was...control and isolation.” Anne Marie also recounted details of her own story in which misinterpretation and lack of awareness played a role, “I’d never been...that was probably my first stint of being on my own. I’d come into some legal trouble and he...seemed to have it together; he was very caring and so interested in me.” “I mean just wanted to know everything about me.” “Uh, he thought I had some you know kind of private pain which I did and he just, he was going to be the one to fix it. And I was going to be the one to fix him.” As she continued to reflect on her experience and things she may have misinterpreted she also described intense emotions.

And it was probably, we were living together within six months, and I was pregnant by seven months...and so it was really tumultuous in the beginning and it was really great, really intense, really “oh god,” you know I just loved him so much. And I would get mad and I would leave and he would come find me wherever I was, even if I...skirted back to the rez he found me there. I always wondered how that was. But at that time I thought, you know he’d go to any lengths to get me, “oh, wow!” you know he’s so “wow!” He’s the one. And I thought that for a very long time. I held onto that belief through a lot of very unpleasantness.

For some, they had grown up with some form of abuse, so abuse was familiar and it was what they knew. As Anne Marie continued to talk about some of the first signs that things weren’t going well, she added, “Well, you see, I grew up in a very violent household. My mom didn’t get hit by her husband; her husband was very abusive to me. And so, I was unaware that men were any different.” She continued, “But again, it wasn’t
anything as bad as I had experienced. I mean it was...I’d lived through worse so it seemed like it was, ‘and what was I going to do?’ I had two kids in diapers. I had no money. I had nowhere to go. It just seemed like that was...surviving was just how I lived.

In Hope’s situation, other forms of abuse took place and the lack of physical abuse (e.g., beatings) made it difficult for her to recognize that she was experiencing DV. Her husband was described as loving and highly affectionate. In tears she said, “I think you know part of the hardest thing was coming to the realization that it was abuse and that um it took me a long time to get there, even after I left.” She continued to talk about what she did not recognize.

To just understand that I was dealing with the same things that all the other women were dealing with who had been hit, who had been beaten, ah, who were at risk for their lives on a daily basis. That I was dealing with all the nightmares and the, flashbacks and everything just like they were and that’s what it finally took for me to accept that, um, [crying] forgive me… Um, for me to accept that, I was abused because when you live with certain things, when you, even though, you know in the back of your mind that it’s not right, you um… but what I was gonna say was, just that um, when you are in the middle of it and you don’t recognize it and you, ah, don’t even understand how it’s damaging you.

Hope noted of her situation that “The good parts were there throughout…it [the abuse] escalated the longer that I was in the marriage.”

**In too deep.** Over time, the intensely positive types of behaviors became more controlling and coercive; the lack of awareness, naïveté, misinterpretation, or “not knowing” anything other than abuse that some women described impeded them from realizing what was happening to them and by the time they were aware of what was going on they were in too deep. In this gradual process, the abuse generally began as verbal and/or emotional. After the “wooing” occurred Vanessa described
And um, and I fell for a lot of things he said and it just seems like once he realized that he had me ‘hooked’ was when all the stuff started to happen…and I just remember the first thing. It started with verbal abuse and the first thing was profanity. He used, he called me this really horrible dirty name and the way he said it to me was with such viciousness that it caught me off guard.

Natasha described an event during her partner’s birthday celebration that marked the beginning of the abuse and in which she realized she was “in too deep.”

When we were out there, um, was the first time he even cussed at me, he called me a ‘bitch’ for ah, dancing by myself. And I was dancing with him but I guess the way I was dancing, he left me on the dance floor and when he left me out there I went out there and said, ‘why did you leave me there?’ and he was like ‘cause you’re a bitch!’ and he’d never cussed at me before, never called me a name so that caught me off guard.

And after this event that caught her off guard, she thought it would not occur again until a few months later when it did and she stated, “He had me in a head lock. I could see he had his fist in my face and he wanted to hit me. That’s when I saw the look it was really there...And I realized, ‘oh, crap!’ this is a problem’.”

Lisa, who described herself as a “people person,” talked about in hindsight realizing that things were not well in her relationship when she was slowly secluded from friends and family, eventually becoming isolated and dependent on her partner.

I started getting very distrustful of everyone other than him.... And all of a sudden everything my mom said, I’d like question it, and just be super angry at her all the time; and we’re never mad at my mom, like I love her to death, and I was just convinced that she hated me. And I didn’t realize it until the very end of our relationship that he was slowly, like just, you know, like kind of changing my view point.... He’d be like, “Oh, your sister said that? She wasn’t joking, she’s really mad at you,”...he would just kind of slip that in and then, go with my view and then be like, “I think she’s mad at you,” and just kind of slip it in over and over again, and then finally I’d be like, “Maybe she’s mad at me.”

She continued, “I wouldn’t even realize what was going on because it was so subtle.”
Kaylea had a similar experience, in which she too found herself over time believing his viewpoints as dependence on her abuser was created.

He would I mean say that I was stupid for believing what I believed and that my family is stupid because they, they are of that religion and um I mean he said a lot of hurtful things about my family…you know I kind of started to believe him because I honestly think I was brainwashed at a point where I was like okay, you know I just said “okay,” and just went on with my thing, and I started to realize maybe he’s right.

Others spoke of a similar subtleness. For example, Alice recalled, “You know, it was so subtle that by the time I realized what’s going on it was way too late. I was in a business with him. I was living in a country with no one. All my support system was in another country…why make my family worry about me when they cannot help me.”

After graduating from college, Christina moved out of state for her job leaving family and friends behind. She recalled the following:

So, this individual kind of gave the impression that he was going to rescue me like I was, I was too lonely here and I-you know didn’t have enough friends and even though I was fine, he made me feel like I needed him, like he needed to do all this things for me and be there for me and kinda be the knight in shining armor. So you know he offered to take me to dinner and show me around his gym because he knew I was really into working out…so it seemed like he was interested in my wellbeing and my happiness out here and um, but is seems like as soon as he kind of had me roped in.

Christina continued to talk about her dating relationship with the man that would eventually become her husband; similar to all the other survivors who shared their stories; she noted that she can now look back and see the red flags. “I have a good education” she said, “so it’s like he somehow like tricked me into you know, thinking that I needed him.” This sense of needing and being in too deep is captured in her description of the night prior to her wedding day.
You know, like I said I tried to—tried to break off the engagement; tried to move out and leave and I just kept coming back and coming back. Um, so we ended up getting married and I remember even the night before the wedding we got into an awful fight. He was screaming at me…and it crossed my mind, “break off the wedding, break off the wedding” and I just couldn’t. I just couldn’t go through with it. I was like in so deep with this guy and I just I don’t know it’s hard to explain, um, and without having any family out here, he had me so roped into the thought that “you need me”…without even saying that. “I look back on it I couldn’t even realize…it’s like a slow boil…you don’t even realize, how this stuff is adding up.

Selina had a similar experience.

Um, it started with emotional abuse and um he was really manipulative…when I finally got to the point where I looked back at the relationship and saw it for what it really was, I saw that it was one of those, I always described it as the parable of the frog in the pot of water. If you put the frog in cold water and then you turn the water up and it slowly rises, the frog won’t notice what’s going on until he’s like you know boiled and turned into soup. Um, that’s how it was, it was really subtle.

**Vulnerabilities.** Consistent with the literature, there are some events that contribute to an individual’s vulnerabilities and place them at risk for experiencing situations in which they may be taken advantage of, victimized, and revictimized. Many women identified and described life experiences that they believed contributed to their vulnerabilities. For some it was dealing with personal insecurities, desire for love and affection, and maintaining a role. In Hope’s case she noted:

…Insecure about myself….It’s not that I didn’t have any self-confidence. It’s not that I didn’t…but initially, yeah…I was very skinny not that I was unattractive necessarily but I wasn’t popular…he [ex-partner] gave me a lot of attention. And um, just I think that’s probably one of my biggest vulnerabilities for myself in that situation is that um, you know my parents loved me and I have no doubt of that and I didn’t have a bad childhood but they weren’t affectionate people…my father…he’s very um, a disciplinarian.

Vanessa noted a similar sense of insecurity, “He was a really good looking, chiseled man, and I was about 100 pounds overweight. I think that had a lot to do with it
too, because he showed me all this attention that I felt that I wasn’t gonna get anywhere else and he, and I was like,

What is this good looking guy doing, paying me attention?.... And then he was so gentle, and oh man I found the perfect guy…., I had just been in a different abusive relationship that was really short term with an abusive alcoholic and I was trying to leave him and that’s what happened, when I got with him he was like, “Oh, I’ll save the day, I’m the knight in shining armor.” So that’s why I was vulnerable at that point in time…. I fell for it hook, line, and sinker. And then as soon as he could tell that I was hooked he started in.

While all the women described the positive qualities they saw in their abusive partners as shifting and changing to become more harmful, women too noticed shifts and changes in their own personalities, as evidenced in what they perceived as a decrease in self-esteem. For some women early childhood experiences, such as traumatic histories of being emotionally, physically, or sexually abused or having a traumatic family background, contributed to their vulnerability.

Selina revealed that her mother had been emotionally abusive, overprotective, and controlling throughout her childhood. “I didn’t know that was bad” she said, “Um, I knew I didn’t like it, but I didn’t know there were alternatives; it was the only thing I knew.” Being a former volunteer at a DV shelter she indicated she knew physical abuse was bad but was not aware there was such a thing as emotional abuse. “I certainly wouldn’t have recognized that I had been experiencing it basically my entire life.” She provided a great description concerning the emotional abuse she experienced most of her life.

I felt like my soul was being slowly embezzled. There were just little bits here and there that were being taken away—so small that I wouldn’t notice because um, you know, it’s, you know like embezzling. Nobody notices that somebody, that a company’s been, you know, somebody’s been embezzling a company until they
look and they’re like, “Holy shit! Where did this $500 million go?” Because it’s just a few dollars at a time, or you know, on such a small scale, but repeated over and over and over again and then you realize you have a problem; and that’s how I felt exactly, I always described it as like having pieces of my soul embezzled away from me.

Hayley described her parents as good parents who did their best. Of her mother she said, “My mom came from a hard background.” However, she too had the experience of growing up with an emotionally abusive parent and lack of “good” role models.

I think that they, well my mother is definitely emotionally abusive and possibly psychologically abusive, um definitely. She put me down all the time. Um and my dad and I, I think we were close. I didn’t see any, any problems there. But my dad was very needy, it’s like he needed a woman in order to have self-esteem. So, I don’t think they were good role models for a relationship and my mom um was definitely emotionally abusive and um, they, they…our household, she yelled a lot. Every day there was arguments…so I, so basically what I’m getting at is that I just feel, I think I had very little self-esteem from, from dealing with my mom growing up.

While Selina and Hayley noted the emotional abuse as a main factor that may have been linked to their vulnerability, other survivors pointed to that the lack of healthy role models or their naïveté as a possible contribution to their vulnerability. For example, Lina, described that as a child she moved away from her parents’ home to attend Catholic girl’s boarding school and so she did not have many opportunities to see interaction between parents. Both her naïveté and lack of role models put her at risk.

Like I said he was my first…guy that really paid attention to me. So, so I was like “okay”…I thought it was okay….I was vulnerable, I was naïve, I was insecure. I didn’t think that I was worthy of somebody better. I really never dated…my dad was really strict. So I really didn’t know about men either because I grew up in Catholic school it was all just girls…so I didn’t really know how a man was supposed to treat you and then I was away like I was in boarding school so I really never like watched my dad with my mom really.

When talking of her experience, Christina noted that the relationship between her
parents “was not great” and may have influenced her adult relationship.

My counselor did an exercise with me about the qualities of my mom, qualities of my dad, good and bad, you know? And how in partners we sometimes will subconsciously look for a partner and try to fulfill like a need that wasn’t met. Or, you’ll sometimes see qualities in one of your parents and they’re not necessarily good qualities and now you’ve picked those in a partner. So I—I found that I did a little bit of that as well. Um, you know my dad wasn’t a real prominent figure, so I don’t know that I ever really learned what a healthy relationship is. I never really saw that you know, um, my parents were divorced. I was 12 and by the time I was like 5, things were pretty awful. Like, I mean there’s never any physical abuse, um, but my dad cheated on my mom. There was a lot of yelling. There was, I mean I remember seeing her crying a lot. So, I think um, that definitely played into it and you know.

As she talked of that exercise her counselor had her do, she further described the link between those experiences and her vulnerability to the abuse she experienced. Of her former spouse she said:

He would always say to me um, cause he’s about 9 years older than I am. And he would always say to me, “You know you’ve been in one other relationship, you just, you don’t know what a healthy relationship is. You don’t know how good we have it.”.... And without ever really first hand seeing like what a good marriage is and what it’s like how do you really define that?... It’s like everybody has their issues and it’s like I didn’t know how to draw that line between, okay there can be issues in a marriage, there can be financial issues, there can be things like that but you have to draw the line, there should never be physical abuse, emotional abuse, any type of abuse. And like I didn’t know that I could draw that line. That I could set those boundaries.

In Lisa’s situation, she too noted lack of role models for a healthy relationship. She described her parents’ relationship as “happy when I was younger, but then as I got older, they fought a lot…. I don’t know they always did better apart…they just aren’t good for each other.” While she did not characterize her parent’s relationship as abusive she noted, “My dad really took down the awesomeness of my mom, like my mom is the most amazing woman you’ll ever meet, but when she was with my dad she just was, his
wife…very submissive and just not the awesome person I know today.” In addition to
this, Lisa also considered herself as a very trusting and helpful person.

But I would just say, you know, just the way I grew up just with so many people
around me that I just became very trusting because I just dealt with so many
people that you have to build trust to be able to build a relationship with someone,
so I trust very easily. And I moved around a lot as a kid so I met tons of people
and I’d be in one place for like a year at a time, so in order to have friends you’d
have to like get in and be friends with them and trust them like right away. So I’m
very good at making friends like that…. But it also makes me exposed to a lot of
different kinds of people. Some are not always the best you know?...I’ve just
always been the helper, you know, I just help everyone. And so when I started
dating him, no one questioned you know, what I was doing, no one questioned
how I was because I just was always gone. I just always was helping people.

While continuing to discuss her vulnerabilities she added, “So I see my parents,
and I see how much it sucks being alone and I—I don’t like being alone, I like being in a
relationship; I like being with other people, you know?” She continued to talk about the
nice feelings she got by being with other people and having someone around during
difficult times because “I’ve always had a hard time working on my self-image and my
self-confidence.” For some women, lack of support and feeling alone contributed to their
vulnerability. In Tylea’s situation, this was the case.

I guess yeah in a way I was vulnerable. I, when I came up to school I didn’t have
any friends…I just came up by myself…. I know a lot of people here but out of all
my friends I was the only one that went to school I had other girlfriends who got
married and then they had babies and…it was different after that. And so I came
up here and I kind of just fell, and I had friends I just kind of fell into their group
of friends and so I had that comfort of having the friends, but I don’t know it’s
kind of hard to explain. It’s kind of hard for me even to really understand, but
even though I knew that some of the other friends might not be the kind of friends
I wanted, I didn’t have other friends and I just stayed with them because they
were you know someone to be with and not have to be alone all the time at
school. So I think that made me vulnerable, just not having, right at the time we
met, just not having too many friends.
In addition to feeling alone, there was also history of family trauma in Tylea’s past. She described her mother’s first marriage as “really bad” and of the marriage to her father she said, “My dad was fairly abusive, um, to my siblings and my mom, but I was his little girl and he loved me…but my dad, I don’t know the full story because my mom doesn’t like to talk about it too much, but um my dad was convicted of sexually assaulting my two older sisters and was put in prison.” While Tylea denied being abused by her father, she said, “He would never abuse me. I mean I was in the room and witnessed him with my sisters a couple of times but he, he would never touch me.” Tylea’s father later went on to commit suicide while in prison when she was 7 years old. Because of her father’s background, she noted that she was not accepted in the community. She did not have many friends growing up and said, “They knew about my dad and what he did and they didn’t want me playing with their children.” Natalie had a similar situation with history of family abuse.

My dad was an alcoholic and my dad—when my dad drank my dad abused my mom. And I—I’m the oldest and so my brother and sister don’t really remember that, but I do. And you know I protected my sister a lot from seeing that and so I think in a way that influenced me because I saw that a lot growing up and…but it’s funny because I saw my dad drink and I saw what happened to my dad and I was like, “I’m never gonna do that. I’m never gonna” and I did you know I turned into the same thing my dad was. But I think—I don’t know how that affected it—but I think that did you know, seeing that growing up that. I don’t know, not that it was okay, I knew it wasn’t okay, but maybe that it ended; I don’t know cause my dad’s not like that now and he’s you know changed. He was able to change. So I don’t know maybe that was maybe…part of me thought “well my dad changed so maybe he will.”

The abuse, whatever form it took in their lives, seemed to contribute to risk and vulnerability. For survivors like Anne Marie, who had experienced abuse throughout her
life she stated, “Sex and violence had always gone together…. It wasn’t as bad as other things I had experienced…this is how you are supposed to live your life and this is what happens, this is how men are.” Vanessa was not at a point in her life where she could discuss or deal with the abuse in her life, but of being vulnerable she said, “There’s all these things. There’s a lot of abuse in my history and stuff and I’ve put it away and haven’t really dealt with it.” She had grown up in a home with an alcoholic mother whom she described as a “yeller” and a drug-abusing stepfather who physically beat her.

Well I had um, my mom had me and my brother alone most of the time until I was like 10, and she got with my step, my first stepdad. She was yelling all the time, because she was drinking all the time an then he did drugs and drank and then he started like physically beating me when I was like 12 and so that’s where I got into that pattern but, you know, I was protecting my mom and my brother so that was where I came into that.... I did not ever observe healthy relationships in that I mean I’ve seen them in passing, you know, in my life. But I’ve never like in, in being raised I’ve never really seen, you know, what I was raised with. And it all, I guess, depends on what you’re raised with because that’s when you’re training, is when you’re raised, and I never saw any healthy stuff.

Similarly, Natasha described her biological father as abusive and stated, “I always thought, ‘not me,’ if a man ever touched me, ‘uh, uh,’ I would never, never…but I didn’t realize that I was with those kind of men.” When discussing her vulnerabilities she questioned how the sexual abuse played a role in life.

I sometimes wonder if it was the sexual abuse. Well, ‘cause I was molested....Because my dad walked out on me. I always wonder if those were the things ‘cause I know that I look for a father in my relationships. I know that I do. I mean that’s why I love my husband now because he’s so much of a father figure and I know that. But he’s good to me so I feel like it’s okay now…oh, and I definitely think that the molestation, molesting, is what made me promiscuous young, and made me attracted to older men because I was promiscuous with older men very, very, young…cause I met him, the abuser that we’re talking about…. I was only 12 and now that I look back, he was abusive then, but it was sexual. But
at the time I was so naïve that it just was like, well, I was too drunk to remember all the horrible things he did to me, even though I was only 12 and he shouldn’t have been doing those things to me, especially, not getting me drunk so he could do those things to me.

Additionally, a couple of women noted that they had mental health issues that contributed to their vulnerability. For example, Natalie noted that this may have contributed to her vulnerability when she met her abusive partner. She had a diagnosis of bipolar disorder and had not taken her medication for several years. “I think at the time I was in a manic phase,” she said. Like Natalie, Vanessa disclosed she too had a “mental health diagnosis” and had been receiving services from “a mental health service provider.” Furthermore, for a few of the women, what kept them and placed them at great risk was a history of addiction. Natalie, Vanessa, and Anne Marie were all in the recovery process, working to overcome their addictions. Their stories are similar in that drugs bonded them to their abusers. Natalie, who was in nursing school at the time when she met her abusive partner described the role addiction played in her life, “You know it was almost like, ‘okay I’ll put up with this just because I’m gonna get drugs out of it.’ So it wasn’t until I kind of, ‘til he was gone and I was clean that I realized how bad I really was when I was in it but at the time I was just—if you know just use.’

She further described her vulnerability to abuse while in her addiction.

I think the drugs obviously did because I wanted to keep—I was willing to put up with whatever I had to, to keep high. I think if I hadn’t been using I would of not been in that situation. Maybe I would’ve at the beginning but I would have been stronger to say, “hey this ain’t right, and you’re either gonna treat me right or I’m gone!” Because that’s how I’ve been before but I think the drugs clouded everything that…you know kinda like girls who end up being prostitutes, you know you do whatever you can to get, to keep the drugs coming and like I went to…NA convention and we had a speaker and she talked about how, she would just sleep with three, four guys a day just to keep high you know but when she got
clean she realized how stupid that was and you know and I look back on that and I was not any better than she was you know I would—I would give him sex to get drugs and I would take whatever abuse he’d give me just to keep getting high and I think that was the biggest part was I didn’t even, I didn’t care what you did to me as long as you were giving me my dope when you were done. So I think that was probably, I mean my issues with seeing my parents and the way I felt about myself got me in there—but I think what kept me there was the drugs. Cause now I wouldn’t do it you know—now that I’m clean I wouldn’t put up with it but at the time it was just like I don’t care do whatever you want, just give me my dope. I didn’t care.

Vanessa described her experience with addiction.

I mean the verbal abuse, the emotional abuse, the fact that like he wants to do drugs and I wouldn’t want to do drugs and he’d be like, ‘Oh come on,’ he, he’d like put me down because I didn’t want to do drugs, to make me do drugs with him. Now what kind of person does that? You’re supposed to want better for your person that you’re with. And he didn’t ever have a job, the whole time we were together. I really didn’t either at that point in time, because I was still um trying to get myself together, get my life back together, because I had been in prison for a couple years, and I was still trying to get my mental health back together, get my life back together, and stuff like that. I was doing pretty good until I met him and I thought, Well I need a relationship, you know? Um and he pulled me down, he just, he tore me down and he tore all my self-esteem, I had self-esteem built up because I had been alone for years because I had been in prison and I had been out for a while, so I had, felt good about myself. I’d been sober, I’m doing good, I’m going to college, I’m doing all this stuff to get my life back on track, and he just came and tore it all down, he was like, “You’re fat, I won’t stay with you forever if you don’t lose weight.” After, after in the beginning he tells me, “Oh, you’re so beautiful….”

Of the survivors, Anne Marie had been the most recent out of the abuse and was still visibly traumatized by her experience during the interview. She too struggled with addiction that contributed to her vulnerability. She described herself and her abusive partner as using and indicated she began smoking marijuana at the age of seven as a means to deal with the abuse she was experiencing at home. As an adult she continued using substances, her drug of choice being meth. “There was a period of time um we’re
both drug addicts so, there were periods when we would be sober,” she said. When she
found out she was pregnant, she decided to get sober and quit using substances.

I was sober, he was you know…providing. He was, he was providing. So it was
probably after, right before my youngest son was born. He…went back to using.
And I came home one night, it was my birthday. My mom and my daughter—
cause my mom had custody of my older daughter —um, brought me home from
dinner and he had a prostitute and a bunch of crack in the apartment. And here I
am, seven months pregnant, with our second son.

However, their sobriety did not last as she describes in the following.

I think he just never ever told me the truth and I think maybe now never even
really knew who he was. Um, it was when he was smoking crack really heavily;
um he was making, gosh, commission checks would be like $4,500, $3,800 would
be gone in a weekend and I was, you know, “What are you doing with our money,
we have babies?” you, know, “I don’t have diapers and you got $4,000 check!
What’s wrong with you?”…We didn’t have any rent because you know that was
in kind, how we got paid. So, I thought—did what was the next best thing and I
turned him onto my drug of choice which was meth. It was cheaper, more
 economical, last longer…. I wasn’t happy, I’ve always been unhappy; I’ve always
had this drug problem.

Anne Marie’s partner’s behaviors became increasingly more abusive as his
addiction grew and he became more paranoid, raping her and forcing her into situations
against her will. As a means to deal with her situation she described, “I know that I had
enough to get me a nice huge fat sack of meth um just to make it through the day. You
know?” The more their addictions were fed, the more vulnerable they became to the
abuse.

As the women shared these painful events from their past with me, I was drawn to
what Christina said, as it was evident throughout all their stories, “You know” she said, “I
think it was just a combination of things.” For these women, it was not one incident or
life experience that placed them at risk; they had experienced a combination of events in
their lifetime that placed them at risk and contributed to their vulnerability. And in their life stories, part of that combination included encountering a partner who was able to gain access to their vulnerability, intimate hurts and secrets, desires to be loved and dreams for a different life. Thus, in trusting someone whom they loved, their vulnerabilities were exposed, exploited, and used against them enabling their abuser to exert power and maintain control.

**Abuser characteristics and behaviors.** Characterization of abusers in the popular culture is often unidimensional and lacks subtlety. The image of an abuser as consistently “out of control” or entirely horrible fails to take into account abuser characteristics that keep women connected to abusive relationships. While the acts that abusers committed and the behaviors they engaged in were horrible, traumatizing, and unacceptable, the abusers were largely “in control” during the abusive incidents and within these survivors’ stories abusers are best characterized as having a “Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde” quality in which they moved back and forth between what appeared to be two distinct personalities. As Anne Marie put it, “I wrote to the judge four pages. I said, you know, he needs some help, he’s twisted. He’s Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.” Similarly, Lina stated, “You know, I mean it’s like a complete different person…cause you, you have this guy he’s like all full of rage you know coming at you and it’s like an out of body…and then he, then you have this other person who is like the sweetest person you’ve ever met. Thus, abusers were charming, caring, attentive and intensely loving, all while being manipulative and controlling even during the moments they appeared “out of control” (e.g., choosing how and when to assault).
For example, Alice stated of her former husband:

   He was a very—very; he was a good boy. I mean, never did I see him fight with
   anyone, argue with anyone, getting a temper, um nothing like that...he’s very
   clever, he’s very...intelligent but it was hard, it was hard living with him.

And when Alice tried to leave him and the hard living situation she was in, she described
the lengths he went to so that she would return to him, stating, “…Some people came and
beat me up too…in order for me to go back to him.” He used these tactics twice, one
month apart from each other. “So he would do stuff like this, and then I realized that
there’s no way I can leave him, he’s not going to let me go. He said, ‘til death do us part’
which is not part of my religion…never said it in my wedding…you know how they can
take and manipulate.”

   Similarly, Lisa described her former partner as her childhood best friend stating,
   “…He’s always made me laugh...we had good times...well, when I went along with
everything, then it was really good and he was good to me and we’d have fun and like he
made me laugh.” While he had the ability to make her laugh, there was this other side to
him.

   He treated me like an object, you know? I was pretty much his plaything; if he
was done with me then he would be rude...cast me aside; whatever he wanted, he
got, and if he didn’t get it then I was in his way...so not only was he treating me
like I was worthless he was flat out telling me that nobody loves me, and he’s the
only one that could ever see any good in me.

   Similarly, of her former husband Lina recalled that “he genuinely cared in the
beginning” and “things were kind of good with him.” Then she went on to describe
changes in his personality and behavior.

   So he was kind of happy but as time went on and things start going not good for
him...like he would just—just like he would be happy then all of a sudden just
start yelling and I’ve never been yelled at…. Then he started cussing. I do not cuss, so all that would start—to call me names and like I said um, nobody has ever treated me like that.

Hope described her former husband as “very affectionate, very loving.” Stating, “People who saw us on the street always knew that, we loved each other. I always thought that I had an exceptional marriage.” However, as she spoke of his other side she recognized a fear he induced in her but that she had not been fully aware of, “…and I realized that I didn’t live in fear when he wasn’t there. I think it took me a while to recognize that I was living in fear.” This fear was induced over time by his abuse, which at times consisted of “outings” that he would plan in order for the sexual abuse to occur. She went on to describe “predatory” tactics he would use to get her and others to be compliant.

These type of people…, they know exactly—they will target your vulnerability, no matter what it is. And he even told me—I remember he used to say to me, he was so proud of himself, he was so cocky…he would tell me how if he found a vulnerability in one of his co-workers that made him upset; that pissed him off, that he would use that against him. Now, are they…do they recognize that they do that—probably not but they have that innate sense that they know exactly what it takes in that exact situation to push your buttons and to make you compliant.

Hayley too talked about the two sides to her former partner’s personality and he, as most of the partners described here, had the ability to make her feel “special and unique,” she then recounted events of a night when she saw him in a different light.

I knew we needed a place to sleep so I befriended this older couple who had a timeshare and they had a spare room and so they let us sleep in that spare room and that night he wanted to have sex with me and I said, “no” and it resulted in…it, it kind of in my mind it’s like…I only remember parts of it. It resulted in I remember being on the floor and he had, he was strangling me…that was the first time I realized “Whoa!” I made a huge mistake.

Natasha recalled, “He was perfect…romantic. I thought he couldn’t hurt a fly. He
was even feminine at times.” Then she noted his other side.

He got pretty aggressive and I had never seen that side of him before. And we were out of town so it was even scarier because he got so aggressive that he was like “I’ll beat your ass!” and I literally went blank cause I wasn’t expecting it, I’d never heard him be that way…. I didn’t know how to respond to it—it was a complete shocker. And when we got back to the hotel room he slapped me. And so that was really a huge shock....I knew in his demeanor that it was...something about it scared me really bad...just the look in his eye changed, his demeanor just changed it was like another person and I knew it was scary and I was really scared cause we were in the middle of nowhere. In another country; so I completely just shut down locked myself in the room started to cry.

She also took note of his changing personality when she returned home from dropping her children off at their father’s house.

He was pissed off that I had went to drop them off. So he was making faces and he finally threatened to leave me and I went after him and when I grabbed his arm and I said, “Stop, I’m almost dressed. Just stop.” And he turned around, threw me up against the garage door and that’s when I got the 15 stitches, my arm opened up and so...there was a shift in his eyes. There was this shift in his demeanor. He would stand up straighter and look, and that “femininity” would go away. And he had monster in his eyes...but when he saw the blood he went right back to “baby, baby, baby.” Back to that femininity, back to soft and gentle on his knees begging me, “See what you made me do, I told you not to touch me”...So again it was my fault cause I grabbed his arm cause I tried to stop him.

Natasha, then described how he shifted personalities again to a “nice guy” when she was made to go to the party they had planned to attend that evening, “When we got out of the hospital, he made me go to the party that I was going to, ‘cause it was a good friend’s birthday party and they had been calling.” And because he was well liked by everyone.

He didn’t wanna fail them, so he made me go bandaged up and “medicine” up and we went over there and he was like, “oh, you know she tripped over the dog.” So I was like, Yeah, I tripped over the dog. Dog ran across my heel and I tripped and I was at the hospital.

The constant shifting in their personalities was at times described as
unpredictable, which created an unstable feeling for many. Due to their former partners’ unpredictability, they described that it was as though they were “walking on eggshells.” Of her situation, Lina described the fear and how she felt on edge, “I mean it got so bad that when I would hear the—when he would come in my heart would start pumping. When he would call me at work sometimes, my heart would start working, like pumping real hard,” She continued on to say “…So like they pick any little thing. I mean I was like walking on eggshells. I did not know, like I would open the door and I did not know what mood he was gonna be in.” When recalling what it was like to live in that situation Christina said, “…But just the lack of sleep, um,…the mistreatment in every way; the constant you know, walking on egg shells, not knowing, you know what’s gonna set him off…. Even after Natasha changed to become what her abuser wanted, she noted:

I was constantly on edge, walking on egg shells thinking, “Is he gonna be pissed off today?” ‘cause he would just be set off out of nowhere…. I didn’t know when he was gonna be set off sometimes it was once a week, sometimes it was once a month, sometimes it wouldn’t happen for a while. He traveled a lot. So when he traveled things were great because there was that separation.

Alice told a similar story of the day her parents visited, “My parents came to visit and I was walking on egg shells for 3 weeks, just afraid that he’s gonna burst in front of them.” The never knowing, fear of him “bursting” or being “set off” were common experiences. Thus, there is a “public versus private” persona, the one outwardly displayed and the other behind closed doors. This too was captured in a brief conversation during a focus group in which women discussed these differences.

Lina: And it’s a lot like powerful men that abuse their wives you know.

Selina: They can seem very nice and or very charming.
Lina: Yep.

Hope: Yes.

Lina: …abusers are charming, they’re very charming.

Hope: Oh yeah.

Lina: You’d be surprised who’s abusive, oh they’re very charming then behind closed doors they’re like…so different.

In addition to these characteristics and shifting personalities, survivors noted their abusers engaged in various types of manipulative behaviors and tactics that eroded self-esteem, created dependency, and gradually changed who these women were in order to gain and maintain control and power over them. As previously described this process was slow and systematic, leading many to be isolated, alone, and dependent on their abusers.

As Hayley noted:

He isolated me…through his threats, to what would happen if, you know, I made friends…so I didn’t really contact people at home…. I had no friends outside of work, and the people I worked with were friends in my mind but um I wasn’t basically allowed to associate with them unless he was there…. The one time I did try and socialize with everyone at work, we were gonna go float down the river, and this girl…had invited me, and we all worked together, and I’d asked…for permission to go and he said yes, and then right before I was supposed to leave and drive over to meet them, he locked me out of the house without my car keys, my cell phone, or my shoes and…kept me from going.

In her situation Natasha reported, “He made sure my car got rid of…. He didn’t trust me…. I had to have permission from him to literally go even just to dinner with my mom.” In order to ensure she was where she said she would be, Natasha noted he would follow her, “I could see him, he’d be somewhere in the parking lot making sure I was there. Or my friends would spot him in the restaurant…. ‘Isn’t that your husband in the corner all by himself? What’s he doing over there?’” Although her friends thought it was
nice that it was ‘cute’ of him to check on her, Natasha stated, “…It scared me.”

It was just, things just got weirder and weirder but the more it got weird the more
I felt trapped and I kept believing that it wasn’t…that it was gonna stop that, the
more I felt like I was attached to him because my world became him and no one
else. Like little by little he was pushing my kids away and my kids were spending
more time with their dad, and I was spending less and less time with my friends
and I mean he was dropping me off and picking up at every door of where ever I
went and I wasn’t allowed to drive unless he was out of town working. Then I
would drive his car. Other than that if he was in town he didn’t want me to buy a
car. I was like “I’m ready to buy my own car.” And he wouldn’t let me buy a car
he was like, “Why…where are you trying to go? What are you trying be? You
know…you’re just trying to…you know get away from me.”

In Carolyn’s case, her abuser also kept her from driving, slowly stripping away
her autonomy.

We had a beautiful home…. I had everything pretty much I needed, I wanted,
except I was being isolated; he was slowly isolating me from my family, slowly
isolating me from my friends. I slowly stopped driving the car, everything was
done at that point near the end of the four years where if I needed to go
somewhere he would take me, or if I needed he would see that I got it or ah if I
had a doctor’s appointment he would make sure when I went- he’d go in with me
and he would come out with me…I knew that his behavior had changed and I
knew that the way of him doing things he had become even more possessive.

Selina highlights the multiple ways in which she was controlled.

He was controlling, but really subtly, really subtle manipulations until he finally
like got just full control over me…. Um he would um kinda tell me what I should
and shouldn’t wear. Who I should and shouldn’t hang out with, um he would try
and poison my relationships. When, I bought a house and I bought….like 30 miles
out of town and that was because his credit was so bad he couldn’t get on the
house…. I was lucky in that way that it was just in my name. But he was the one
that dictated where it was, he didn’t want to buy an existing house and have to
worry about reroofing or anything like that. He wanted a brand new house and um
and it had to be, you know, far away from our families….he wouldn’t really want
to do things unless they were his idea. Um he would get really jealous, so when I
wasn’t working with him he would make me call him periodically just to, ‘cause
he thought I would, you know, end up in some pilot’s hotel room or um kinda,
kind of always kept me on a leash.

Alice shared, “In the end he wouldn’t even let me go to the doctor because, ‘why
pay the doctor, we should eat healthy food.’ you know?” As a result of lack of medical attention, Alice did not find out she was diabetic until after she left the relationship. She said, “I only knew after I left and I went to the doctor because my hair was falling out.” The extent of control is also noted by Natalie, “He was a control freak.” She said, “He wanted to know who, he wanted to know what.” And of the time he wanted to use her car she described, “…He wanted my car and I wouldn’t give ‘em the keys to my car and he basically threw me down the drive way and hit [me] and took off in my car.”

Control behaviors were often more direct and demanding, rather than subtle and manipulative. Further evidence can be seen in Hayley’s description, “He would always check my time cards. He expected me to bring it home so he could see when, when I left.” She went on to describe an instance when she was beat because, it took her longer than expected to check out of a grocery store.

I drove this kid home and um I was supposed to go to Wal-Mart on my way back and the lines were so long there and I’m calculating in my head how long it’s taking me and I’m like, “No, no, no, no, no” it’s taking too long he’s gonna be suspicious, something’s gonna happen. Finally got the groceries, checked out, got home as fast as I can, and got beaten over it, because he didn’t believe that it could have taken me that long.

Through withdrawal of affection or demonstration of his frustration, Hope’s ex-husband was successful in getting her to do what he wanted.

I remember at points having discussions but…it was a manipulation. Initially some of the things that happened he seemed to love me so much more every time that I did something. Every time that he put me through that situation; every time that he introduced something new, um, something that I knew wasn’t right and I tried, he—he just seemed like, he um, he just loved me so much more for it....I waited on him hand and foot, I brought him his dinner, I made sure his drink was full all the time, all he had to do was like wiggle his glass, never even had to really say much. If he got up in the mornings and went to the shower, I had to set his clothes out. I had to have the towel ready. All of those things were
manipulated out of me through his affection or his frustration and he knew which one to use at the right time.

Hayley also went on to describe ways that her abuser successfully “picked” at her self-esteem.

Looking back now I see that he would put me down by talking about other girls and how pretty they were or his interest in them, but just little things like talking about how amazing his ex was in one way—in one way, that I was horrible at... She was so skinny, and...I’m not even overweight, but...and he talked about how down she was, like how she would do anything to protect him and so...it kind of ate away at me ‘til I got to the point where I said, ‘til I was saying to myself, ‘I am going to do a better job and show him that I am a more um tenacious and uh committed and uh I can’t name the word I’m looking for but a more, I’ll do anything kind of person that she was...Loyalty.

Natalie shared that due to what she experienced and the lifestyle she was living at the time, she didn’t feel like herself and her self-esteem was lowered to the point that it enabled her to overlook positive comments or observations others made.

I don’t know, I think that it was nice to see that people still thought of me but then I would be like, “I’m not that person anymore.” That’s just a fake person, I’m like, I’m not really that great.... I would just be like, “that’s not me” and you know I’m only that way because I’m high and I’m only that way because I’m using and “you don’t even really know me.” And so I would just like ignore it. I had enough low self-esteem that I just would forget about it.

As she questioned the situation she was in, Lisa recalled, “He started kind of excluding me from my friends and family and I started getting very distrustful of everyone other than him.” Lisa continued to describe the control she experienced.

So he followed me around all the time, like if I had any free time, he was there...if I wanted to spend it with anyone else, he would throw a fit...if it was like I was going to someone he really didn’t like, someone that probably would have opened my eyes to things and told me I was acting stupid...he would say that he was going to commit suicide, so I’d have to soothe him and bring him down from that, and that would take all night long. You know?” So then I would never see my friends. And I would never see my family because I was just constantly trying to help him out because...either he needed me to bring him somewhere, like right
then, or he would, I don’t know, he just always found an excuse to be with me, like I needed to be there so that he could fix his car.

This depicts not only her former partner’s controlling behavior but his self-focused and needy behavior. This self-focus and neediness on the part of these men was a manipulative tactic that made the women feel indispensable, thus more able to accept responsibility for everything that went wrong in the relationship. Other examples in which the abusers required their partners to be responsible for their wellbeing are evident in the stories. At times threats were utilized to accomplish this, such as in Christina’s story as she recalled an incident in which her ex-partner received a DUI. “He said, ‘you know I just can’t put myself in these situations anymore but in order to go through with that I need you to help me. I need you to…’ you know so I felt this like pull and this obligation to help him.” Additionally, she shared an incident that occurred during a time she tried to leave, “He would pull out the knives in the kitchen and say he was either gonna slit his wrist or he would just hold them up over me like...trying to exert his power.”

In Hayley’s situation, it was her job to ensure he did not get caught by police because if he did happen to get caught he threatened to harm her family.

[He] didn’t drive, because he was too afraid of getting pulled over…the law is anytime you come in contact with a police officer you have to produce your i.d. and they do a warrant check, even if you’re a passenger in the car. So [he] didn’t drive and if he had to go anywhere, I had to drive him and he would say to me, “If we get pulled over and I get caught, I’m gonna slit your father’s throat and burn your parent’s house down.” So I mean, I was scared…of this man. And um scared to go anywhere.

Similarly, Natalie was also made to protect her abuser from the police, “And I was so scared that, cause he threatened me that if I ever did anything or told on him that
you know he’d kill me. And after all that shit that he’d done to me I believed it, you know? I had no doubts he would kill me.” The sense of responsibility for him took many other forms too, for example ensuring he went to school and had a place to live, as Lisa describes below.

Well he was living with us for a while, and so that was really hard because he got kicked out of his parents’ house and he said that they changed the locks and changed the pass codes and everything. But then when I finally brought him home he went right in…so I’m not really sure how true that was. But um, but I was convinced he had nowhere to go. And um he had dropped out of high school and was doing school up where I was living…so he was getting his diploma, so if I kicked him out he would not only have nowhere to stay he wouldn’t finish school.

Lina too had a need to help her ex-husband that became much stronger after he apologized for his behavior. She described what she and other women in similar situations experienced. “They are like, I’m so sorry! I don’t know what happen to me please, you’re my life.’…He has nobody, I’m his life. I better stay, stick around and help him.” She said, “And if someday tells you that, you know if you’re naïve, you’re vulnerable if somebody tells you ‘you’re my life.’ You’re like, ‘Oh, gosh I’m his life.”

Abusers were also able to use coercive tactics that include manipulation. These were at times used in order to talk women into doing things they did not want to do. For example, in Hope’s case she said, “You get coerced into—it’s not something I had a choice in…. From the very first incident, um, I was—if I said ‘no’ and I did, you know, ‘I don’t want to do that.’ it was just constant, ‘come on, come on, come on, come on…’” She further went on to describe:

There were lots of times when I was in situations that I didn’t want to be a part of and I would try to—if I was apprehensive or if I showed any sign that I didn’t like it or that I wasn’t going to follow his command then it was moot. Immediate frustration with me, it was all my fault. I was being um, “cold” I… was frustrating
him. Um and then maybe he wouldn’t talk to me for a couple of days or maybe he’d withdraw his affection…he wouldn’t touch me…. It was all within his control. It was more about, his ability to control me. To get me to do whatever he wanted to do, whatever he liked to do and the more I could do for him, the more that I couldn’t resist, or I couldn’t-I-I think that power was what really fed, his um, drive…the longer I stayed married the more intense those situations became…he had to have more control. It had to have more risk, it had to have more danger, it had to have more…it just got worse.

Vanessa had a similar experience.

And then he wanted to have sex with me, and I was like, “I’m not having sex with you after you just did this to me.” So we, he made me lay there and sleep with him all night and I did. And then the next day I went with him to his hotel room and that, and then he was like, he talked me into having sex with him because he said, he wanted me to have sex with him because he was afraid that if I didn’t have sex with him that day that I was gonna leave him because of everything that happened. I cannot fathom how he could have sex with me and look at me when my whole side of my face was black and blue. I just couldn’t understand that.

So Vanessa was talked into having sex as proof that she was not going to leave her partner. While the main goal of these behaviors was to retain control over these women, many of these behaviors could also be described as “tests of loyalty” in which women had to demonstrate their love and commitment to their abusers.

Instances of blaming behavior can also be noted. The women were blamed by their partners for their own abuse, indicating that if they hadn’t been “provoked” in one way or another the abuse would not have happened. Natasha noted several instances in which her partner blamed her and made her responsible for his behavior.

He was in bed hugging and kissing me and making me feel better. And telling me how he didn’t know what happened and completely convinced me that it was something I did. That I made him feel insecure that he was...just loved me so much that it um, made him so crazy for that moment and made him snap; that he’d never felt like that before; that he was “so sorry”...immediately he picked me up and was like “why do you make me do these things to you?” “Why do you make me feel like this?” “Why do I love you like this?” like it was always my fault.
Alice described her life as “hell” noting he often looked for reasons to “fight.”

He was looking all the time for fights. I couldn’t do anything right. Everything that happened in the neighborhood, in the stock market, and in the world was my fault and it was very hard…and they brainwash you and at least they try and they manipulate you and you know, sometimes you believe that- a lot of it is your fault….and I know domestic violence trust me. And even now sometimes, somebody will say something and I will say, “well, maybe I could’ve of done it- this situation different” but then I know it’s not about what I did or what I didn’t do. It was about him. It was about him.

Also, recall that for the women in this study who struggled with addiction at the time of the abuse, it was easy to coerce them into using substances. The combination of all these tactics and behaviors not only left women disempowered and vulnerable, but many described feeling a loss of sanity. “Crazy making” is a process in which mind games are played by denying negative things that occurred, lying for the purposes of maintaining control, and other manipulative behaviors. For example, Lina described feeling like she was losing her sanity.

I was such a basket case that, I did not know whether I was coming or going. ...I’m like, “okay, this is not living.” I had to make a decision ‘cause my sanity was going. I mean after a while it confuses you. And...you have to hold on to your sanity and you don’t end up in jail because after a while you’re like, “okay, who am I getting today?” Then you, then you get confused and then your mind start going and then you can’t take it anymore. I mean, you’re like, “okay” then you snap...you can snap because...you start believing what they’re telling you. You start believing what they call you...because one time like a whole week he’s like, “gosh, oh baby” this “baby” that-“I love you.” He’s giving you flowers, he’s wining and dining you and just like that-that’s how quickly they snap. You know you’re all happy then, “where have you been?”...“Why’s your dress like that?” “Why do you smell like that?” Especially,...if you work, oh my gosh, you can’t even look at somebody “Why are you looking at him?” “Why is he looking at you?” You know? and then, any little thing, nothing is ever, enough, you know cause you’re like oh, okay, “maybe if I dress like this.” Then you start getting paranoid, and...’cause he was really paranoid and...then you start second guessing yourself. You’re like, okay he’s saying this, maybe I am this. You know?... I mean he was cheating and I was glad that he was cheating. So that’s not normal. So that’s why your sanity comes into mind...you start believing their stupidity.
In her situation Lisa noted that his many lies were utilized during times of vulnerability when she “wasn’t really in the present mind.” For example, he would say, “everyone else hates my guts.” She continued, “Like he would say those things when like my guard was down and I was already upset. “He’d be like, ‘It’s ‘cause they all hate you.’ “So, he knew me really well; he knew how to get to me, and he did.” In her experience, Vanessa described it as “total mental torture, physical, mental, emotional, everything.” She indicated it was “combinations of things” that led to this feeling of torture. She was trying to stay away from him.

He would call me, and he would hang up on me or he’d leave dirty messages and then, and then he would just text me mean stuff, and all this stuff. And I was just like, “This harassment’s gotta stop,” but I would always want to reply, you know? And then he was texting me from his new girlfriend’s phone, and I’m like, “What the hell are you doing? Why are you doing this to me?” you know, “You’re torturing me, you know, you’re cheating on me, now you’re hanging out with her, now you’re beating me too” and I’m just like, “This is not okay.”

**Surviving.** Survival takes on many forms and there is no one “right” way for an abused individual to cope or deal with the set of circumstances they encounter. The diversity of each person’s living conditions required them to act in ways that they believed would keep them safe or help them cope with the abuse. The women in this study varied in their survival behaviors and their coping mechanisms. As previously mentioned, substance use for some of the women was not just a risk factor but it was also a means to survive. Anne Marie was open and frank about her addiction and coping mechanism stating, “The drugs. I did drugs…at least it was bearable then [referring to the abuse].” In Alice’s case childhood foundation was one thing that helped her. When identifying what helped her live through the abuse she said:
I think now, looking back, what helped me was my strong childhood basis. I had a good childhood and I think this helped me a lot because all through the abuse when I had all them bad things and all the degrading things...it never really sunk in. I always was telling myself, ‘yeah, okay, I’m glad you think this way.’ You know, I didn’t take it as-I didn’t believe it in other words. It didn’t succeed and I think he was angry and angrier because he knew that. That he is not succeeding in breaking me down the way he wanted....I did have to change who I was except inside my core, was strong to resist.

Similarly, what helped Hope survive was focusing on inner strength.

[My parents] raised me with the idea that “you can deal with anything, you can get through anything.” And I think that—that, has always been a factor in how I think about things…it was one of those things that I thought…. I’ll deal with it the best I can…. I’m dealing with it.

One way Christina survived was to focus on her work. She stated:

I guess I just tried to focus on work, focus on keeping my job, um, that’s something I knew I had to do so that was my goal. You know? And I tried not to let-ever let anything slip as far at that went and I ended up you know in the middle of that getting a promotion. And so I think it was just trying to make sure I was as safe as I could be. Um, I don’t know. It’s just so hard. It’s hard to say. I mean I don’t know. It’s just kind of amazing like the coping skills. You have in something like that.

Lina also noted she had work to focus on.

So, I had work so that also helped. Cause there’s-there’s some women that don’t work and they have to stay in you know with him 24 hours. So I was glad that I-I was glad I had work ‘cause at least I was out away from him.

In Natalie’s situation she noted that her children helped her survive.

Mmm, well probably a lot of it was my kids. You know I-I kept going because I had them and you know I think a lot of it was.... I’d come back here for a while and be with my kids and my family and I would see how my life was before that and so it was kind of it would remind me what I had just live for the weekends when I’d come see my kids.... I think that was basically it-was my kids. I don’t know what else. Looking back, I don’t know what else did. Probably my kids mostly.

Not only did Natasha’s children help her make it through but the memory of the
son she had lost also inspired her to survive, “but at the same time I knew I couldn’t live like that. And so I said, If can live without my son, I can live without him and that thought is the one that kept me, but I just didn’t know where I was gonna be able to exit…that’s the only part I couldn’t figure out.”

For many, keeping silent about the abuse and maintaining secrecy was one way of dealing with the abuse. Self-silencing—another form of survival which entailed not speaking up to the abuser, keeping personal thoughts and opinions to oneself, and basically becoming “invisible” or an “extension” of the abuser—helped some women. Others noted that giving in to demands, not putting up a “fight” when being abused, and doing whatever the abuser wanted helped them through the experience. All these methods helped to keep the peace. They not only helped these survivors cope, but also helped them and their children stay safe and alive in the midst of the abuse. Women also learned to become aware of “the look in his eyes,” needing to become attuned to non-verbal behavior as a means to gauge if they were in danger of a violent outburst.

**Maintaining secrecy.** As previously mentioned, survivors maintained secrecy about the abuse as a means to cope and stay safe, but they also note that shame, embarrassment, and isolation factored in. Tylea noted, “But not only that, I hadn’t told my family that I was dating him because I knew that my family would be so disappointed that I was dating someone like that.” Hope said, “What I was gonna say was, just that um, when you are in the middle of it and you don’t recognize it and you, ah, don’t even understand how it’s damaging, you just um…and it’s not something you can talk to others about or anybody would understand.” She went on to further explained:
For a long time I couldn’t even tell my parents the story or any of my family. And um, I have two sons who are grown now that um, you know they saw the side of my marriage that was good. Of course they didn’t see the other side, um, so it was very confusing for them. And yet, um, I couldn’t share with them what the real issue was…. I didn’t tell anybody ‘cause I didn’t want anyone um, to judge us, to see it…. I was ashamed of it and I was ashamed for myself just as much as him. And in my case, the world that I was kinda put into um, there was so much of it that was accepted, um by the-you know, the people that...I was surrounded by.

Lina shared her similar experience.

Um, I didn’t talk about it, ‘cause nobody wants to talk about it. It’s like, “oh, we can’t talk about it.” Cause you’re—you feel ashamed. You feel ashamed.... I felt ashamed ‘cause here was career woman, I mean even though I wasn’t from here I had everything going on but, I had an abusive husband. You know?

Of her secret-keeping Alice stated, “For many years I didn’t talk about it. I was embarrassed that me, how did I come to that?” she said, “my mother told my sister when she went back [from a visit], she said, ‘Your sister lives in a golden cage.’ My mother saw it, but I never talked about it…while my parents were alive; from me they didn’t know anything. I was simply embarrassed.” In addition to her own secret-keeping, Alice noted that his family had kept secrets from her: “I discovered that he has a bad temper that was concealed from me. I discovered that his family knows that he has a bad temper. I discovered there’s DV in his family which I wasn’t aware of, everybody kept it quiet’

Natalie who was in school, kept it secret from her coworkers and colleagues.

This whole time I was in nursing school and working at the hospital and everybody thought that I was just fine. I was coming home to my kids but I was getting high the whole time and trying to hide everything.

While maintaining her secret, Christina managed to hold her life together as noted in the following.

I didn’t tell any friends about it until the very end. I never told my family when he
hit me or when he tried to strangle me or really any of that. I would say “oh, you know we’re fighting.” But I would keep it so high level that, you know and I would completely down play it—completely. And I mean people at work had to have seen the way I looked and you know, like I said somehow I held it together.

Self-silencing, becoming invisible, and staying out of the way. Staying out of the way, as previously described, also kept women safe and “invisible.” They learned to stay silent in order to avoid violent incidents. In Selina’s case, she utilized this coping skill to survive, “just trying to...basically allowing myself to be controlled, not rocking the boat, not questioning, um not standing up for myself.” Similarly, Tylea noted her reaction during a fight, “I wanted to leave but I was scared to...physically leave his house, and I would just kind of stay there and keep quiet because I was scared.” Lina learned it was best to stay out of the way, “I just tried to stay out of his way. Especially, cause you knew when he-when he was in his mood he would—you just knew.”

In other instances, several women noted they did not have a voice and were not free to speak up. Similarly, others described staying out of their abusers’ way, becoming almost invisible and a mere reflection of their abusers’ thoughts and opinions. Anne Marie described her inability to speak up, “But I never could tell him, ‘don’t treat me like that!’...I never could say, ‘I don’t deserve this!’ you know and, ‘you must treat me with respect!’...I didn’t know that that was even an option. Similarly Hope stated, “And he...that was part of the personality that he wasn’t gonna let you say, ‘no.’ I didn’t have the ability to really say ‘no’ in anything in our relationship. When Alice sought her mother-in-law out, the advice she received was to remain quiet as described in the following:

When I complained to my mother-in-law she told me, “So what if he calls you
whore?” “You know…he knows you’re not a whore, and he loves you he’s your husband, so just don’t pay attention. This is the way—this is the way we talk. Don’t take it personally; you know he doesn’t think you’re a whore.” And stuff like this and when his brother broke his wife’s back, my mother-in-law said, “Well what did she do to him?” you know, says, “Why did she make him angry?” ..“I learned from my mother-in-law which was bad for me but I was young and didn’t know better…she used to tell me, “So why do you tell him, don’t tell him stuff. Don’t tell him you’ll make him angry” …I didn’t realize, gosh this is not right…why shouldn’t I tell him, why should I be afraid to tell him things, you know?

In Natasha’s situation, the self-silencing was not only reinforced by her abuser’s behavior noted in the following:

I really did believe him that it was me. I started thinking about the relationship... about how aggressive I was with my mouth, I...always protected myself and thinking, maybe that’s what gets me in trouble, maybe that’s why he’s slapping me. Maybe that’s why he’s telling me, you know, that it’s me. So I was becoming more and more. “I’m the one that needs to change” and I did change for him. I became you know very, “can I do this, can I do that?” taking him into consideration first before anything. Wouldn’t talk back, cause he would say, “if you would just listen.” I remember that being one of his favorite things to say, “if you would just listen. You’re so used to being the boss; you’re not the man in the relationship.”

It was also unknowingly reinforced in her social circle as a result of their high regard for her abuser.

He was catering to everyone, giving ‘em drinks and being really nice to everyone. Everyone was “he’s so wonderful, we’re so happy for you.” The whole time I’m sitting there like, he just shoved me into a spike where I have 15 stitches but didn’t say anything. Everyone was in love with him. Everybody loved him so I just stayed quiet.

Giving in. This survival strategy was utilized by several of the women. For them, it became easier to give-in to the circumstances and demands placed on them. There was less struggle when women went along with what their abusers wanted. Selina tried to keep her abuser happy, “…Accepting everything, like all of the rules and limitations,
and...that he put on me, and just kind of trying to keep him happy. Accepting it.” Several of the women noted that it was easier to accept and give in, as it avoided conflicts. Their abusers were less angry and less likely to assert power and control; in a way, they experienced “less” misery. Lisa described what it was like when she gave in to her abuser.

If I said no, then he’d like freak out and like start being like, “I thought you loved me?”...it was just so much easier to spend all my time with him than to argue, you know?”...if I did what I wanted to do there would be a fight...when we did what he wanted to do, he was okay, you know? He wasn’t, he didn’t act overly controlling, he wasn’t angry. When I was with him just to be with him, we were happy,...so I just would put the other people out of my life, and just stop initiating contact, because I was happy when I went along with what he wanted, so I just went along with what he wanted...It was just, when I’d want to do anything else I was miserable.

The women reported that at times it was no use to put up a fight. They had learned that it was much easier to give in. As Hope stated of her situation:

Um, so it was, you just get to a point where you realize that, in order to survive, in order to make things easier, in order to um, be loved, that you just relent, that you just give in and um from the very beginning; I would just, you know tell myself, “ah, it’s not so bad.”...“I’m not gonna die.” “It’ll be over soon.”

Similarly Anne Marie shared:

Um, it was easier just not to argue. You know, and it’s been my experience since I was young that if a guy is determined there’s not a lot you can do. So it seemed better to, or easier to acquiesce.

Natasha described what occurred within her as she survived by giving in:

He would rape me so long that it would become to the point where I would finally like just flip and just make myself enjoy it and I would cry and then end up hugging...cause I did love him so, I would get to the point where I would just...I would let go of being mad. I would let go, just give up ‘cause he was strong.

Christina also noted that, due to fear it was much easier to give in and to endure in
her circumstance, “At that point I was more afraid of what would happen if I left and stood up to him than to endure the daily verbal, emotional, financial, ah, you name it; I mean there was every type of abuse. Similarly due to fear of getting caught, Carolyn reported it was much easier to go along with what he wanted and pretend all was normal.

So I had to, whatever I was doing had to be, I had to pretend that I was okay. I had to pretend that the routine, our everyday routine, was carrying on just as he wanted you know?... because I knew if he found out exactly what I was doing that he would attempt to kill me and he would attempt to kill the three, my three older children.

** Disconnecting from emotion/self.** Due to the trauma these women experienced, many described needing to become “numb and disconnected.” As Anne Marie stated, “Early on I learned that this way, that to get through that, is just close your eyes and it’d be over soon. I mean, you fight you’re likely to get hurt worse.” So many of them, like Anne Marie, often found themselves feeling numb and disconnected from their emotions and themselves. Some women described moments in which they disassociated from their bodies and minds as a means to cope with the abuse that was occurring to them at the time.

Hayley described what she did to cope, “I’d like, decided to become a shell and quit having my own feelings, and my own thoughts, and my own opinions.” Tylea noted much was going on and she had no time to think about herself, “You have a hard time remembering what you used to be like - you don’t even think about that anymore.” Lina further goes on to describe her experience, “I mean, sometimes I’d be like—I was so numb, so numb that you could probably do…I’d be like ‘Okay, What else can you do to me now?’ and then he also got more violent.” Lina also described that the “numbing”
helped her deal with the violence when she realized what her situation was going to be like, “...you become numb after a while cause you’re like, ‘okay, this is it.’ Hope also talked about feeling numb.

But yeah, you find ways to um, to protect yourself and...you become, you’re a different person in each element. I never was, however, I could never make myself be in the situations that he wanted, I could never make myself enjoy it, be a participant of it, I always just became, numb.

When describing her dissociative experience during acts of abuse, Hope recalled, “Most of the time what I did to get through things was close my eyes, talk to myself a couple of times, I literally, as I kind of write in the book, I wasn’t there.” In the book, Hope described a sense of being out of her body. She went on to describe how she had distinct parts to herself.

It’s like you, you’re a separate person when you’re dealing with that [the abuse] and you are a different person when you’re dealing with your kids, and you’re a different person when you’re dealing with family.

Vanessa also talked about how compartmentalizing helped her live her daily life.

You put it away, compartmentalize your life...because I’ve got to go on with my life, I have to do things. I have to support my family, I have to live.... I have some challenges with dealing with emotions and stuff like and it is, it has a lot to do with my whole life, my childhood, my adulthood, everything. Uh that was a way that I used to survive is uh disassociation...just that things are happening to you but you’re not, you don’t allow yourself to be present in your mind in the moment because it’s too much sometimes.

Disconnecting at times meant to physically remove one’s self from the situation momentarily and not necessarily an attempt to permanently leave the relationship.

Christina mentioned that one way to cope and survive when the situation became bad was to physically remove herself. “So, um, I mean there times when it would get so bad that I would run out of the house get in my car, drive down the street and just sit there.”
Hayley’s example highlights that fact that these women often employed more than one method of survival. Requiring them to gauge the situation and utilize that which would keep them safest at the time. Hayley described how she had to give-in, disconnect from self, and self-silence.

The only thing that kept me going was that I had to let myself die and just become a shell that didn’t care or feel for myself anymore. And allow myself to just become a puppet and um not think for myself, not have opinions...and do what um just become kind like kind of an extension of him. That’s what helped me stay alive.

**Leaving as a Process**

Almost all survivors in this study reported that it took multiple attempts for them to finally leave their abusive partners for good. It took time for them to mentally prepare and get to the point where they were ready. For some the preparation took many years, as survivors gained more knowledge about DV, and learned skills to deal with the abuse and enable them to be self-sufficient. In addition to building support systems, their readiness to leave increased until the day there were able to finally extricate themselves from the situation.

**Time Between Deciding and Actually Leaving**

As reflected in their stories, the women in this study did not leave after the first incident of abuse. As time passed, events unfolded in such a way that women either became ready to leave or the level of danger escalated to a point where women needed to flee. One aspect that made leaving difficult was hope instilled by abusers’ promises. Their promises gave women an assurance that their situation would get better, the abuse
would end, and that abusers would change their behaviors. Coupled with the promises, for some women there was the belief that if they stayed with their abusers they would continue to receive love (after being convinced by their abuser how no one else would love them). Thus, fear of losing love and affection and a sense of hope played a role in delaying leaving behavior. Alice shared:

We had an argument and he slapped me. So I took the bus and I went back to my mom’s house. He came to my mom’s house and he was crying and he was apologizing…promising he will never do it again.

Due to his apparent sincerity at the time and assurance it would not happen again, Alice returned to her husband. Lina described the hope coupled with apologies.

Gosh that hope and then the- oh gosh, they’re like “Oh, I’m so sorry! I don’t know what happen to me-please.” Because like I said the first time I couldn’t believe it. Of course and then they apologize, “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.” And you believe it....

Anne Marie also went back with a sense of hope that things would get better, “I went back. It was going to be...‘Oh, we were all gonna get it together, we’re gonna make it right and from this point forward.’ ‘From this point forward it’s just gonna be different.’” Hope described how she did not want to lose the love and affection she was provided.

Ultimately, on the other side I have a very loving, affectionate, husband…and a very intense love on one side. So I think if there hadn’t been that intensity on the affection side then it wouldn’t have balanced out enough and maybe-maybe I wouldn’t have you know, put up with it I’m not sure...I mean ultimately I didn’t want to lose his love for me...I didn’t want to lose the wonderful marriage I had. Um, you know at least what I thought I had.

**Early learning.** Almost all the women discussed the importance of both informal (e.g., learning from other’s stories in support group, through observation of others, online DV information, books) and formal (e.g., obtaining skills and training, attending college)
education that helped them recognize discrepancies between what the abuser was telling them and what they were learning to be true about the situation and themselves. Selina recalled that she attended groups at a young age and had gained knowledge from what she learned that she could apply to her life as an adult. “She would send me to groups when I was starting at like age five for children of alcoholics.” She continued, “And so I learned a lot of emotional skills through those groups.” With regards to what she learned about abuse she stated, “I can’t remember specifically but I’m pretty sure that—that’s somewhere where I learned that, you know, physical abuse is not...that’s where you draw the line.” She also discussed what she learned by observing others.

I had a friend at that time who was leaving a relationship and this guy, I watched him kind of string her along, and I watched her just feast on scraps, and um he would make like really small and vague promises and she would feel like they were the biggest deal ever, and she just put so much weight and stock into them. And I watched her go through that and I started to see that that was happening to me too, and I didn’t really see it um but it kind of sparked what was going on. It kind of sparked those ideas....because I didn’t, I didn’t really want to admit it.... I don’t know if I wasn’t ready to or...every once in a while, “Oh that’s just like this other relationship, this other bad relationship, this relationship that I know is bad that my friend is going through.” And I would, I would just slowly see the parallels just more and more, and it helped me recognize the emotional component. So it helped prep me a lot for just um, complete separation.

Lina also shared how she was helped through observation.

Observing. I knew a couple of women that had gone through it and I saw that they came out of it; so that-that also gave me hope. But um, like I told you over the phone it took me three times to leave.

Vanessa shared how she learned informally by educating herself through books.

I read, I read some books.... I forgot what’s it’s called but I read a self-help book about men that abuse women, why they do the things they do, and stuff like, something like that. And it was, it was pretty helpful too. Just to realize that it wasn’t my fault.
Lisa was able to learn about her relationship through the assistance of a DV advocate who provided her with information. She said “They um had a domestic violence lady come in and she...brought out this pamphlet on stalking and he fit every single criteria, and I was just like, ‘Yeah, that’s not okay.’”

**Developing discrepancies and identity shifts.** Survivors learned that what they were living with was not real love, and in the midst of abuse they recalled thinking to themselves “this isn’t me.” Developing discrepancies included realizing the relationship was not what they imagined it to be, it wasn’t going to change, and they had bought into a version that was not accurate, so then it was a little less challenging to walk away from the relationship. Hayley came to realize her abuser’s actions and treatment of her was not love when she compared it to the love of her parents who were visiting at the time.

I’m pretty sure that they saved me, by coming and see me. Because they reminded me that they still love me. And it was like, it’s still painful to think about that to know what I was going back to and to see my mom and my dad going past the security, and these officers between us. But… but that was kind of what broke me. And they didn’t even know…. It reminded me that they did love me. It reminded of what love really was, and it wasn’t what I was about to walk back to, and I had forgotten that…. And it’s like they brought part of that back to life…Does that make sense about me becoming a shell and just like dying inside and then my parents flying out there and bringing part of that back to life; part, part of my own feelings back to life. That’s when I um, that was the, that was the catalyst that kind of, but it was still hard to leave after then, but eventually I did.

Lisa described what it was like for her as she attempted to disprove her partner’s version of reality.

I’ve just spent my life knowing that I was worth something, and I was gonna be someone, someday. And I’ve, I mean I come from a single parent household so you know, I have the mindset of, “I’m gonna go do something with my life, and be awesome!” I had lost that will. I was becoming submissive, and that’s just not my character, you know? And I just saw that I was losing myself, and I was like, “This isn’t me, this isn’t how I feel about myself,” I just realized that if I kept
going the way I was going then I would marry him and I’d unhappy for the rest of
my life. And I realized he was convincing me that I was worthless, and I’m not,
and I know I’m not. And so I just finally, was like, that’s not okay.

Selina noted that she felt a different version of herself was trapped within, “I was
pretty able to be true to myself. Um at least consciously, I think I was like there’s this
really awesome me trapped inside that just didn’t even know how to get out.” Hope
shared not only her sense of awakening after an incident in which her partner had yelled
and belittled her, but described how the abuse escalated when her partner noticed the
changes.

I woke up one day and realized that all the aspects of my marriage weren’t what I
thought they were. I started realizing that this is awfully one sided...I waited on
him hand and foot in everything that I did...I just started to realize…” [after the
yelling incident] and from that night on…I saw things totally differently. I
recognized that I was um, I started to resent all of those things that I used to think
he appreciated so much and I started to resent everything I’d ever done for him.
That I was waiting on him hand and foot, that I was doing everything in the house
that he was not helping me the way I was helping him, that it was all one sided.
We always did everything he wanted to do, not what I wanted to do. I started
recognizing all those things. And as I started recognizing those things, I think he
could see a shift in my-in me. And I think he was really fighting to get that control
back and the elements of abuse got worse. And they started to escalate more and
more and they were happening more often. Every single time that we got in the
truck I was to get naked.

It was the many lies that Tylea’s partner told that helped her realize what the relationship
was really like and that things were not going to improve.

Then when I realized that it wasn’t gonna get better then the barrier of the
emotional “I wanna help” just stopped and there really wasn’t any more barriers. I
guess coming to the realization that, ‘cause he started to get new friends who were
you know his suppliers and who he ended up supplying and I, I came in contact
with them and when I would question, or when I would talk to them, but I would
talk to him, their stories wouldn’t match up.

Lina described how a combination of informal learning and observation helped her notice
the discrepancy.

I started reading the-the love you know in the Bible and I was like, then I went on-line and kind of got it like where I can understand-you know like they broke it down and I was like, “No, I don’t—I don’t think this is love.” Okay, he does that, “no I don’t think that’s love either.” And that opened my mind, open my eyes and-and that took like almost a year. Just listening and looking at other ways of living. Of alternative ways of living cause the way I was living-gosh, I don’t-I don’t know how-I mean I look back and I’m like “gosh!

For Vanessa finding out that her partner was cheating made it clear to her the type of person he was.

I think that one of the main things you know, sometimes I’m ashamed to say this, but he started cheating on me, right after he started abusing me. And I think that had more of an effect in making me realize what type of person he was. It was almost as if I was like, “Well if he’s gonna cheat on me, I’m not sticking around.” You know what I mean? But, but then I was like to myself, you know, if that’s what it takes, that’s what it takes, oh well.

Once Christina’s son was born she noted looking at the situation in a different way and something, “clicking.”

It’s just like a combination of things. It was kind like the perfect storm, everything just kind of came together. Something clicked but I- I’m telling you it was my- having my son being born just completely changed me. I mean changed the whole way I looked at everything. You know?

Natasha describes a similar “click” and talked of what she went through as she began to evaluate her situation, see it differently and began to notice discrepancies:

I used to tell him, I’m like, “I gave you a child and your child died and I’m his mother. How could you hit me like that?” He didn’t get it, he was just like, “Because you, your mouth, you don’t listen. It’s you, it’s you.” And then finally I said that enough times that I finally was like, “He has no respect for me” cause I kept saying, “but I’m his mother how could you hit me?” and I would think, “I can’t call the cops that’s his father. I can’t call the cops. I can’t put him in jail that’s his father.” And then I finally thought, “You know what? He doesn’t give a crap who I am, why do I give a crap who he is?”...then I really realized that it had nothing to do with him...The “click” the trigger was...it wasn’t when he hit me, it was um, right before the last really bad abusive beating.,, But then one day
he showed up with this person, he had drugs and I said, “you need to get them out of here!” and I went as far to say, “if you don’t get them out of here, I’m gonna call the cops.” And he grabbed me by the throat, he threw me up against the wall and said, “if you call the cops, I’ll tell them it’s yours.” That clicked. That is number one when I knew he did not have my back. That’s when I knew he was not my husband, he was not my protector…He was not my kids’ protector…that’s when I knew I was not staying with him because he was basically saying, “I don’t give a shit if they take you and your kids; if you lose your kids, if you lose your house.” He was saying so much with that little bit of words and I was like, “oh, oh, okay.” I mean I really, that’s why when he hit me again, I was like, “I’m calling the cops.” Cause I knew he didn’t have my back. I knew he wasn’t protecting me. He wasn’t gonna protect me. He wasn’t gonna protect my kids. He didn’t care. So I no longer cared. That proved to me 100% that if something happened he would; it didn’t matter. I didn’t matter, my kids didn’t matter, no one mattered but him. That was when I truly believed it cause up until then I still believed that he loved me enough that he really wouldn’t hurt me, that he really wouldn’t kill me…but that moment when he had me up against and he was like, “Call the cops I’ll tell ‘em it’s yours!” and he meant it. I was like, that would mean my kids would get taken away…. I would lose my house I would go to jail, all these things could happen and he would do it to me. So when he hit me again a couple weeks later, I was done. That was it.

**Mental preparation and steps to leaving.** The women also shared that before they were able to leave, much preparation and planning took place. Several of the women noted that there were certain things that needed to be accomplished, considered, there was an order to the way things unfolded in the relationship, or certain steps had to be taken before they could move along in the process. Hope described what it was like for her, “It was a—it was a process. Um, I do know that day that my mindset changed, um and I think it-it took me about 3 years after that mindset to finally leave.” The day Hoped referred to was the day she was yelled at for an hour straight after receiving mail from the IRS. Tylea also shared that she had to mentally prepare and took small steps that included testing what she’d told herself.

Then I got to the point where I said if he hits me, he hits me, if he yells at me his roommates can hear. I don’t care, I’m gonna leave his house and get out. And
then I became comfortable with that and I could do that and then I really did try to end it, break up with him but I was scared of what was really gonna happen. And he, he um would threaten to call my family to um just you know to come follow me and you know I was, I was scared. And um so I, I mentally prepared myself for when I was going to actually leave.

Lina shared that her process began with thoughts of leaving and evaluating her situation.

Um, I had been thinking about leaving him for a while and then something good would happen and I’d be like “oh, oh, maybe I’ll stay.”...what I never understood ‘cause I’m very independent, and I’m like, “I don’t really need him.” But then your mind starts playing tricks and you’re “oh, yes you need him.” And I’m like “Why? Why am I s..?” everybody was “Why are you staying with him?” and I had no answer for them because, it’s not, I don’t know what he was doing for me.

Alice discussed how she planned.

I planned a lot. I planned a lot and when we moved...in 2002, and when I left was 2004.... I planned how am I gonna do it. I planned I’m gonna rent an apartment for them[daughters] and move them and I didn’t know what. And when he’s overseas...he had girlfriends, young girlfriends there, you know, so I figured when he’s abroad maybe I can do this and then I’m gonna run to my country.... I made crazy plans that were based on fear, but then it turned out much better than that because when he threw me out, um, that gave me a chance...because I knew he has to go.... So I said okay if I only stay out for a little bit and my daughters can be safe with him, then once he leaves, then I can do stuff. So it turned out much better, if I would be [in her country] how would I divorce him, I don’t know. Because I was here, I could’ve done everything that I needed to do.

Due to the dangerousness and very real threat of death in her situation, Carolyn went to great lengths to plan for her eventual exit.

I was plotting for a whole year, I was taking little bag, plastic bags from the grocery store and packing underwear, socks, a set of clothes for this one, a set of clothes for that one. And I’d take them out to the old car that was in the backyard and stick them in the trunk under the tires; I had so many little bags everywhere trying to plan for the day when I was going to try to run with eight children.... I had to hide everything from him because he was always questioning, he was always investigating, he was always checking things you know?... I was changing my bank accounts near the end you know, changing my bank account so that he couldn’t have access when I leave. I was um changing my address, I went and got a post office box um and like I said one of my police officer friend she helped me secure that little place that we stayed in, and I had to, and I had I just was, was so
fearful that he was going to see me different than he had seen me every other day, and then say, “What’s going on?” and start hitting me or something then I’d have to, I might spill the beans. So I lived with the fear for a year that he was going to discover what was going on.

Part of Christina’s planning and preparation entailed considering possible scenarios and how she’d react in those scenarios.

I mean, it was after like I said after my son was born. Um, it was like everything that happened was just magnified for me. And just made it clearer, and clearer and clearer in my mind. And then-so then it became not, “Well, should I leave?” it became “Okay, I’m going to leave.” It’s just, you know you have to have your safety plan. You know I had to make sure my son was safe and I had to make sure I was safe doing it. so it was just trying to figure out; you know you kind of think through ‘what if’ scenarios in your head. Well like that day, okay what if he comes at me when I ask him to leave. What am I gonna do?

Natasha too had a lot to consider as she prepared.

It was like “Where and how am I gonna exit this?” because I did try to kick him out a few times and he would sneak back into the house and watch me sleep and he wouldn’t touch me, he wouldn’t hurt me but that in itself was just, creepy and that in itself was like a threat. I felt like he could come in and slit my throat, he could come in and shoot me. He can come in and hurt one of my kids you know, so I kept being nice to him. I kept being nice to him. So I just didn’t know how I was going to leave him…but I knew I was gonna leave ‘im. After the second beating I knew I was gonna leave ‘im. But then the third one, I 100% knew.

**Multiple attempts/critical incident.** As seen throughout their stories, the women attempted to leave their relationship multiple times. For some it was as few as two attempts, while others noted it took them 10 or more attempts to be able to leave. As noted above, the women needed time to learn more about themselves, learn to recognize and accept the realities of their situation, learn about DV, and plan and prepare a safe exit if it was possible. Often in their stories, however, there was a critical incident where the level of abuse escalated to a point at which there needed to be an immediate escape. Of her multiple attempts Alice noted:
I left him about seven times and every time I had to go back. The first time he promised that I can stay with the children in the house and he’s gonna move...I came back in the house and then he said okay, he’s going but he’s gonna be taking my oldest daughter who was seven with him and if I called her that means that I want to talk to him, that I want him to come back to me. He was doing stuff like this. Ah, one time he was following us, another time, he was following the school bus and he found me...he found where I live

Alice noted her critical incident occurred the day he kicked her out of the home.

One day, ah he got his crazy attack and he started yelling at me, he said, “You better leave now before I kill you!” and lucky for me my purse was next to me. So I ran out of the house and I went to a Motel 6; first I went to the bank to take money, I took enough. I knew I will need this time an attorney and stuff cause I always tried to do things by myself and I realized that I need help. So first I went to the bank then I went to Motel 6 and I stayed there. I went to the mall, it was behind the mall and I called my daughter and I told her, “Don’t worry about me, I’m fine, I will get in touch with you.”

Tylea described her multiple attempts and that she was in fear because in past relationships he stalked former partners:

I would always be scared if he was gonna hit me and he did start shoving me um and things and I finally got to the point where I, I said you know if he hits me, it’s fine I’m just, I’m gonna walk out. And I did walk out a couple times and I as soon as I got in my car I locked my doors and I put it in reverse and left, but I always did come back because I was scared of what he would do if I broke up with him.... He had his like camouflage attire and he would, he said that he would spy on them, that he would like hide under bushes in his camouflage like I didn’t want that...and I, each time we would fight and I would physically leave his house that got me just a step closer to being just done with it and I didn’t care anymore to just say, “We are over.” And when I finally got to that point I, I was scared but it was like a relief off my shoulders, I really did feel lighter.

Lina provided an in depth picture of her multiple attempts.

I was working at this hospital and he was having problems with his knees and-any little thing that happened to him he always thought I did it. So he thought I, cause I work in a hospital, I injected something in his knees and so it was my fault. So he went to the hospital and um, he started yelling and calling me names and stuff you know. So, they—cause I think every hospital has like a domestic violence—and so they called me and they’re like “Do you want to go to shelter cause he’s really...” So I left, I left for a week. And of course oh, “sweet nothings.” So I
went back and that was the first time I left. Then the second time I left, same thing he accused me of something and he was just went ballistic dragging me and stuff. I was like, “okay, can’t do this.” Dragged me I think also choked me…and I blacked out and...that has never happened before, I have never blacked out before and I was like, “okay!” So I went to a shelter...and that was kinda hard cause the way the shelter was, was kinda like boarding school for me. Cause it was like, was kind of like this room and with like bunk beds. It was kinda like boarding school but to me I was like, “okay at least I’m not with him.” So, I went back. I was there for another week and I went back.

She noted that three months after that incident, “He just went ballistic again.” And she went onto to describe her critical incident.

This was really bad. Dragging me off in the yard. It was bad this, and...that night I said, “That’s it! I have had it! Tomorrow morning when he drops you off to work I’m not coming back.” But that day I don’t know maybe he had something going on, I don’t know, so he’s like…I’m not gonna take you to work. Let’s um, let’s go home because every time he would hit me it was like a little “I’m sorry.” But at the end the “I’m sorry” wasn’t like it used to be, it was just, “Oh, I’m sorry.” And you know little kiss, but before he’d be like attentive and stuff. Like I said, as the year went by, he started caring less and less and less and I was like, “That’s it!” So the next day when he dropped me off at work, he was still that, “Oh I’m sorry...” but um, I almost went back…but something told me to call him to come pick me up, so when I called him and he was—I could tell cause he cussed at me when he was angry and I was like “Okay, this is not, this is a cycle okay, I can’t keep doing this Lina.” So it was the scariest thing I’ve ever done, I mean I did not eat like, my stomach was in knots for a week when I went to that shelter. It was the scariest thing I’ve ever done. But I just had to keep reminding myself, that I’m, I’m free you know, I don’t have to deal with that anymore. I can deal with a couple of women, so I stayed, I was very proud of myself I stayed for 45 days until I got this place. So I was very, very, proud of myself for staying, cause like I said for the first few—I don’t want to stay for a week and I went back.

For Hope, she realized she had a small window of opportunity to leave. She said:

When he finally got a job out of state and he was gone for a couple of weeks at a time...And I knew—I also knew that I had to do it while he was gone. And so I quickly went down and ah, talked to a friend. Um, got some advice um and filed for divorce. I’ve been divorced now for 9 years. And when I left and I will tell you when I left, I was running. I don’t know that I felt strong. It wasn’t like, “Okay. Done. I’m taking my stand and I’m out of here.” It was more like, I have got to get out of this and I’ve gotta do it without any fight, without any manipulation. I knew that I was very vulnerable to him. I knew that um, if I didn’t
run, if I didn’t find a way to get divorced quickly and easily, I didn’t fight for anything, I didn’t ask for anything because I knew if I had to fight, if I had to put up with his manipulation, um, that I was vulnerable to him, that I might go back. That if I had to deal with any of that and it got too overwhelming that it would just be easier to go back.

Lisa described the events that took place the night she finally realized she was ready to end the relationship.

The night before that I finally got rid of him, it was the night that he realized that...he lost me. And I had finally snapped out of it enough to say, “I’m never taking you back.” And um he just he went through every trick in the book, I mean, he, that’s when I realized how much he had been manipulating me, because not only was he trying to sneakily do it, he did it right up to my face...I usually watch movies to go to bed, he turned off the movie and said, ‘No, you have to listen to me.’ And all night long until I fell asleep he kept trying to like hold me there so I’d have to listen and then I’d go to move, and he’d just follow on me, and just, he’d be sitting, he sat there all night long, telling me that everyone hates me, that my family hates me, that no one will ever love me, if I leave him then I’ll never talk to anyone again because...I have kicked them all out of my life and none of them will ever want me back. [He said] that everyone always hated me; they were just always using me for their friendship. He went through every single one of my deepest, darkest fears, and then some. And he just, like everything he said was everything I had been feeling, that I couldn’t understand why I was feeling that. And I realized that he had slowly been changing my mind towards those things, you know? And he just was outright saying, “You suck at your job, you suck at life, you, I don’t know why you’re still alive like there’s no point; you might as well just stay with me because at least you have some reason for living, and all this stuff. And I was just like, “Wow!”...That’s when I, I realized how far it’d gotten. How far I had let myself go, and that’s when I was like, “This guy is not gonna be in my life anymore because this is not okay,” And I just finally got the will power to completely get him out.

Carolyn shared dramatic events that occurred the day she left.

With him being a brick mason, it was raining, so he couldn’t work outside so he was home that day. It was like, “Oh we’re gonna try to get to the police station and here he is sitting at home,” so I had to pretend everything was normal, I say, “I’m gonna take the baby to the babysitter,” you know and so I kept her out of school and he was wondering, “How come she’s out of school? Why isn’t she in school?” and she had asthma and so I told him I say, “Well she’s having an asthma attack so I need to take her to the doctor and let them give her a treatment this morning before I take her to school.” So I packed the baby in the car and I
packed her in the car and I’m you know we’re trying to pretend and I pack the baby’s little snacks you know just like I do all the time. And we get in the car and I pull around the corner, pull over and just, just lose it you know. I’m, I’m, my daughter is trying to, she’s trying to comfort me you know? And I’m just shaking so hard I can hardly drive the car. Trying to pretend that everything’s okay and getting out of there with her and the baby safe, and the other kids safe at school; so he’s home by himself. So we,...when we get to the police department, I dropped the baby at the babysitter’s, and we go to the police department. And I tell them at 8:30, I say, “If I don’t get something done with this man before 2:30 when the other children get out of school,” I say, “he’s gonna kill some of these kids.” And so the police department, they did believe me, but they took it before the judge while we were in there doing depositions and seeing the child advocates and all that stuff, they went before the judge trying to get a warrant you know for his arrest. And out of every two hours I’m like, “If we don’t get this done by 2:30 he’s gonna, he’s gonna kill my kids, the kids that aren’t his,” you know, “he’s gonna kill somebody.” So they’re trying and trying and the judge signed the warrant at ten minutes after 2:00 pm.

Similarly Hayley described the traumatic event that helped her get to a place in her life where she could leave.

He came home drunk because he had been out drinking and he ended up almost beating me to death. And I remember thinking to myself while this was happening that if I could count how many times he was punching me in the head that meant I was still conscious and if I was still conscious, I was still alive. So I counted somewhere between 14 and 17 because like, I was not thinking straight because it’s really hard to keep counting when you’re taking blows to the head. But um then sometime between 14 and 17 he stopped and um I couldn’t get out of bed for 4 days because I think my brain was swollen and I probably should have gone to the hospital but um I had vertigo like so bad I couldn’t, I couldn’t, if I tried to stand up I would just fall to the floor. And if I needed to use the restroom I had to get one of these rolling chairs and kind of fall off the bed into the rolling chair and then roll to the bathroom because I couldn’t walk. So the fourth day the vertigo finally lifted enough to where I could walk even though it was still, everything was spinning, and I um, I went to the women’s shelter and I was sitting there and there was a woman there and I remember her telling, saying to me, it, it’ll be okay, I know it’s not, it doesn’t seem very nice here but it’s gonna be alright, you’ll get used to it. And um, um I just felt I couldn’t be there so I called my boss at this hotel I had worked with, and she let me stay in a room at the hotel for two weeks, while I saved up money to leave. So I um stayed in the hotel for two weeks and...he found out what room I was in and he was like harassing me so then I went back to the women’s shelter and I stayed there for two weeks.
Dichotomy of Strengths and Weaknesses
(Barriers)

Interestingly while many of the women were able to identify their strengths, most also described their strengths as a “double edge sword” or as character traits that were taken advantage of by their abusers to maintain power and control in the relationship. For example, Lisa, who identified as a people person and a helper, recognized how her need to help her ex-partner made her vulnerable because he knew she cared for him and felt responsible for him. The following presents this dichotomy, describing the survivors’ sources of strength that helped them survive, get through, and eventually leave. It also describes areas of vulnerability that presented themselves as barriers to leaving the situation.

Intrapersonal strength. Several of the intrapersonal strengths identified by the women included being kind, helpful, and empathic, a good listener, hopeful, strong, persistent, intelligent, and “seeing good in others.” The following captures some of what the women identified.

I think mostly it my great faith…that whatever will happen will happen, that doesn’t mean that I don’t have to contribute to what will happen but my belief is that I try to do my best but the rest, the end result is not up to me. So I think this is part of it. I think, ah, I have a very good listening ability. I can listen to people and I think I have big compassion. Especially, you know, when it comes to domestic violence but basically, I think, most of my strength come from my childhood. And many times when I listen to women, and they talk about their early childhood, how most of their lives they’ve been abused, I can see in them ,that, it’s hard for them. It’s harder for them to accept that they don’t deserve it...they had all this bad energy that came at them from early childhood. It’s harder for them to shake it. And I think this is my strength and for me I shook it easy because I knew it’s not true and I think this is you know, my strengths. (Alice)

I am determined…and um open-minded, and I was open to, to a new way of doing things because, you know, I knew something had to change. And my
strengths are that I’m um willing to change, willing to make change in my life, to better my life. And willing to work hard to get the things that I want. (Vanessa)

I am a very tenacious person. When I put my mind to something, I will, I will follow through with it to my death.... I’m also an intelligent person, is another strength of mine, and I think my intelligence also is what helped me survive, because, even though this dude was a total sociopath, total manipulator, I was still smarter than him. And then trying to out manipulate like a sociopath is pretty much impossible but my intelligence really assisted me in finally convincing him to let me leave without him hurting me or coming after me. Because I’ve heard that’s the most dangerous time. (Hayley)

I’m a very great conversationalist. I love to talk. And now that didn’t stop, that’s from the time I was a baby you know, so...but um I think I have um an attitude or something about me that people enjoy speaking with me and of course I love, like I say, I love speaking so it, that kind of works, it kind of fits in. and I know I’m compassionate and I care. (Carolyn)

Even though I felt like I had been brain washed and my self-esteem had been eroded, I still was very heavily self-reliant. I knew that I was a good person, I knew that I was capable of a lot of things, I knew I was really smart, and I knew that I did matter....I just wrote about it on Facebook um a couple of weeks ago just, I have myself. I’m not going anywhere, like I can’t leave myself behind, that’s impossible. And so I have to look after me...I feel like a lot of it is just a clarity of mind and like an ability to see these things like the fact that I matter and like see the patterns in the relationships and be a little bit more self-aware, I just I wish I knew, I think it’s just inborn to a certain extent, you know some people have more drive and ambition in a lot of areas, and um I just think it’s major in my case- that’s the only, that’s the only thing I can really think...my biggest strength and I would say is my brains and so that’s what I used to help rebuild myself- I learned as much as I could about the patterns and how about how to get over them and how to use my brain to see the world in a different way (Selina) I don’t use [drugs]. That’s a big thing I don’t cloud my mind...I mean I’ve relapsed and stuff since I left...and so I’ve had to learn that I can’t deal with it that way...(Natalie)

I’d say, the fact that I could get out of bed in the morning, like that was the hardest thing for the longest time. Like I think that going on and just doing what I need to do in the day was strength for a very long time, I’d say my, my people skills like, I love people, and I love helping them. So that’s a great strength....And just my openness with people, because now I, I express myself better and I tell people when I think that they shouldn’t be doing things to me, like if I think they’re taking advantage of me, then I say, “Hey, I can’t do this, you know, it’s not fair to me,” and so, just my, my strengths would be just the way I interact with
people,…”Just the fact that I realized my problems; like I went and saw a therapist because I knew that I wasn’t dealing with it and I knew that I needed to get help, so just the fact that I can be humble enough to say, ‘I need help’. (Lisa)

I’m pretty strong, so I think that helped me; being strong because yeah, I cry easily, but, I think my strength helped me too, to stay in it and dwell with it sometimes, um, I think that’s it, I think it’s my strength. Um, I’m like a pit bull, I mean when I get something, I do not let it go, you know until I’m done with it. (Lina)

When I think about myself and I think about other women who go through these things; I realize that it takes a very strong person to-to deal with all of it-to deal with any of it-to um, that people, you know, um, have the perspective that these women are weak and they’re vulnerable and they’re victims…and I realize that-especially the ones who choose to stay-they’re not weak and they’re not-and maybe they have some vulnerabilities; I certainly was vulnerable and [inaudible] recognize my vulnerabilities since but um, they’re not weak people…They’re very strong people to um, you know to put up with things that they have to put with - and still have a life and still create a home um, and still you know manage to hold things together…(Hope)

I’m very dedicated. I’m very passionate about whatever I commit myself to. So, I mean you’ll see that in…my work. You’ll see that. I’m a runner so I’m very passionate about that; passionate about my son. So um, anything I do I kind of do it 110% and I think that was something with the relationship too. I don’t like to fail and so I had a hard time also with the whole stigma of like divorce and you know, because obviously I didn’t get married saying, “oh I’m just gonna try it out and if it doesn’t work, I’ll just get a divorce.” (Christina)

I think for me, even though I was so attached and didn’t want to leave and just kept coming back, I did have the resiliency after a point to get up and leave…I think that was a strength for me to begin the process of letting go. Um and I’ve always had really good resiliency with you know setbacks, I’ll just bounce back really fast and you know I don’t let a whole lot of things get me down um and even when he was abusive and yelling at me and calling me names and you know making me cry, I always, I wouldn’t leave his house feeling guilty that I felt, I always left his house feeling uplifted and I think that was a strength for me to not make myself feel guilty of “Oh I’m leaving, I need to stay there because he’s my boyfriend I, I think that was my strength yeah.” (Tylea)

My talking. I talk a lot but that’s always been what gets me through it. I realized that with [referring to her dead son] I mean losing him I realized that I needed to talk about it. To this day I like to talk about it and it makes me sad that people get sad over hearing people speak about things that are bad because I don’t think it’s a bad thing. I think it’s something we need to do. That’s how I process it and um,
and for me, repeating, and repeating, and repeating it until I’m tired of repeating it, gets me through things. So I guess that’s a strength….Writing. I wrote a lot. I learned to journal, a lot. Filled up a lot of journal, cause I realized that writing something down is much better than saying it cause sometimes saying it might hurt a lot of people’s feelings cause not all, not all thoughts when you’re trying to process hurt are good ones. You know I had a lotta anger towards my mom, towards God, towards the world, so that got me through it so when I went through it again with him, to let him go, I went back to journaling. I went back to talking, I went back to the things that I used while I was in grief. That’s the way that I looked at it, was I’m gonna, I’m grieving him, he’s dead to me so I’m just like could live without him, I’m gonna live without him. I mean my son didn’t deserve to die but he deserves to be out of my life. So I’m going to process it and let it go. So it that’s a strength, then I guess that’s my strength is processing it. Processing makes me accept it. (Natasha)

Some of the women also gained strength by envisioning a better future for themselves and their children. As described below, some “saw” their life going in a different direction. They had a sense that there was a different life, a different way of being, but at the time they did not know how they would get to that version of a better future.

I guess, kind of I always knew that I wasn’t gonna last and I knew somehow it would end so I just kinda kept going through it. That it wasn’t permanent - that sometime, something would change. I didn’t know what, but I guess I did have some hope that something was gonna happen….I guess I kind of knew the whole time I wanted to get clean and I wanted to get out of it. So I kinda wanted to show-my daughter especially you know—even when you’re in this you can get out. You change and…it just took me a long time to get there so. (Natalie)

I didn’t know how I was gonna do it and I didn’t know when I was going to do it but I knew it was coming. (Carolyn)

I want a better life, you know, I want a better way of life, and that [the life she was living] just wasn’t doing it for me. (Vanessa)

This is not the way when I was growing up I saw my life going. Yeah, and I was like, I may have loved him but that’s not love either. (Lina)

Social context. Many of the women described the important role of family (e.g.,
parents, children, in-laws), friends, and coworkers in their lives. Some identified multiple sources of support, while others recognized they had a few. However, the support they gained from these sources fortified them as they dealt with their circumstances. The following presents the role of social context.

After a violent incident [my] brother, sister-in-law and my sister too, to a certain extent...My dad was a big support um I stayed with him for a few days after, afterwards, after I was assaulted and um, and he would go to court with me and like just talk to me, give me advice, and kind of like boost me up a lot. (Selina)

So when I got ready to move here I made a deal with my parents to loan me the, the eight or nine hundred dollars and by the time I got here I give you that money back, so it was, it was just the only support like from the family that I got. (Carolyn)

My best friend in the world was the only person who ever gave a damn if I was safe or not. (Anne Marie)

I have a couple of friends who’ve remained um good friends for the last few years that I’ve learned to kind of surround myself with good people. (Hope)

There was one girl who actively tried to get me to leave…Um she would say things to me like...she said I could come stay with her...There was another girl there who I came to work one day and had a big bruise on my arm, and she pulled me aside and she said um “You don’t have to put up with this, you can leave him,” and at that moment...I was ready to say “Help me.”....But the things that people did on the outside that helped me was making me, realizing that I was capable of love, of being loved, I mean, realizing that I had some value (Hayley)

His mom told me, she’s like, “You need to leave.” She’s like, “I love you like a daughter but you need to go.” She’s like, “from the day you came here to now there’s nothing left of you.” She’s like, “I look in your eyes and you’re gone.” She’s like, “I love my son.” But she’s like, “you need to go.” She’s like, “if you’re ever gonna save yourself, you need to go now.” And she was scared of him too.... My family, you know I had a friend that I’d called and said, “look I-I need help.” I was using 24 hours a day. I was using all the time and I was like “I need help.” And he called my mom ‘cause I’d grown up with him and you know within an hour my parents were there and my parents got me into treatment and they helped me. (Natalie)

It wasn’t a shock to his mom, when she saw me, she was like...you gotta stay away from my son.” She did not want me going around him because she knew he
was gonna hurt me….I think my daughter- she was really, she helped me really be strong….She kinda was like telling me, you don’t need to be treated, you need to leave him, and at first it didn’t sink in. And her and my mom telling me this stuff, you know, they’ve been telling me this all the time, my whole life. But this time it was like, something’s really gotta change, because it’s been a lot of years, I’m older now, I’m, I’m trying to move on with my life, I was trying to make these changes when I got out of prison and stuff (Vanessa)

Like, my mom, my friend...Um I ended up going to one of my best friend’s where I didn’t see him a lot, so when I did see him it was like a very rare occurrence, but we were so close that it didn’t really matter, you know, one of those friendships....So he’s the only person I could think that would still listen to me and I went to him, and just kind of unloaded everything, and put that on his shoulders….it was just one of those bad nights and um, and it had gotten worse and worse and it just, I couldn’t take it anymore, so I went and told him, and then-So he knew about the abuse, so then he made me tell my mom. And so then my mom was like, “Okay, we got this.” And I had broken up with my boyfriend at the time. And um I, he said he was coming over to get all his stuff, which I knew he would come over and try to get me back and try to apologize...then I called my mom and I was like, “He’s on his way over, I don’t know what to do,” so that was really good that my friend helped me out because then he probably would have come over and I probably would have dated him again. But um but my mom said like, “I’m on my way home, just tell him that, like don’t let him know that you’re alone right now,” you know, and all this stuff. And so then I text him and I was like, “If you come over the cops will be waiting for you, just so you know,” So, I had that going for me, and then since then like I had my mom as a support, so that was really good. (Lisa)

I’m like, gosh I just don’t wanna go back there anymore. Cause…time flies...and then your kids grow up and then you don’t want the kids to see that. You don’t want them to see that, cause yeah they see. My son was like I didn’t know-every time I got up mom, I didn’t know what was-was gonna happen…and that’s sad. ‘Cause I felt the same way ,every time I would get up I would say my prayers and I just did not know what was gonna happen. (Lina)

My maid of honor um was really, super, super, super supportive. And having her next to me at all times. Like literally lying in bed with me, sleeping with me…just…that helped me through it. My mom took me away to Hawaii at the time and when she took me away, I knew she took me away because she wanted to get me out of the house for a little bit. (Natasha)

**Work source of stability and validation.** A few of the women found strength in work. Being employed helped them have a sense of safety and stability, and the
validation they received at work helped them with their confidence.

I had a good job and um, that also gave me strength. Eventually I think it also, I was doing well in it. I was in banking for a long time, I um continued to be promoted and grow in my career. Um, and I think gaining confidence in myself and...in my business side helped me finally to um, realize that I had enough strength....just having ability to grow gave me strength.....Um, learning. You know? I have good skills for what I do. Even though I’m changing careers right now and starting fresh, um, I’m intelligent enough that um, I want to know more. I want to be better. Um, and I think probably, having learned people skills in my past career, I think that helped me a lot. Actually, um, the corporations that I worked for, they were really good about um, educating and training um their staff. I went through a lot of different kinds of trainings um, management training and um people person skills and sales skills, you know all those things that they wanna teach you to be a better sales person also makes you a better person. In some regards they taught me a lot that way. So I think those things have you know given me strength also I would say I found value in myself in my abilities and skills at work, values that were recognized by outsiders- bosses, clients, friends that were unrecognized, suppressed and hindered by my spouse. (Hope)

That support system is good to know, cause like-like I said. I in the back of my head knew that I can go to my job and ask for help. So that was good to know. (Lina)

Support groups. As noted throughout, a major component that women found helpful during and after the abuse was the support and strength they received from group attendance. This was a place that women could feel understood by others in similar situations. Their feelings (e.g., fears, frustrations, doubts) were validated and normalized. They gained valuable information and found healing in the groups. The women described the benefits of attending group and strength they gained.

Once I started to go to support group…I had to make a choice because by that time I went to school and I learned to become a CNA - by that time I started working, I couldn’t go two places. So I had to make a choice and I chose the support groups because...seeing all these beautiful strong women who know, you know and who, had the same thing happen to them. It gave me more and it gave me strengths and empowerment (Alice)

I honestly don’t know how I would have got through without my friends from
NA. I mean I don’t know...Just hearing other people made me feel not so alone. You know just hearing that somebody else had been through the same thing. (Natalie)

I mean just to go there and see people of all different races, all different walks of life, all experiencing the same thing. I mean for the first time I didn’t feel like, “oh, I’m the only one going through this.” You know? ‘Cause people don’t go out and talk about, you know, “oh I survived domestic violence.”...So just to see everyone sitting around the table and sharing the same stories and it like validated everything for me. (Christina)

**Role models, supportive people, and other women.** Having opportunities to learn from others was important for these survivors. By observing how others coped and moved past abuse, women were inspired to move beyond the abuse and influenced to live a different way. As noted above, observation of women in support groups was helpful to those who attended. For example, as Lina previously mentioned, in her early learning, watching women come out of similar situations—having these informal role models—gave her hope that she too could come out of her situation.

Now, the woman who slept on the bunk below me she gave me a lot of strength, because while she was at the shelter she got diagnosed with breast cancer. She was supposed to be getting married to her abuser, and he was still trying to get her back. And she was talking to me and she’s like, “Man, if I go back and I marry him, I can get treatment, because he has health insurance and being his wife I’ll get the health insurance.” And she felt like it was, she was either choosing to be abused or choosing to probably die from cancer. And um when I, when I left the shelter, she, she, she’d, well like every day, she was like, “I am not gonna do it, I’ll die, I’ll die if I have to die from cancer. I’m not going back.” As far as I know, she didn’t go back to him. But I got a lot of strength from like talking to her. (Hayley)

I think just figuring out what people are good for me, and what people are bad for me, and just surrounding myself with the good ones. Because if you surround yourself with the bad people then you’re gonna be influenced by them. Like there’s no way not to be, and they’re gonna be in your life and you might end up in that situation again. But if you surround yourself with just good, loving people that, you know, you don’t have them taking advantage of you and then expressing um your feelings about it to them and being open with them and just saying, like if they ever cross a boundary, just saying, “Hey, you know, that’s not okay. We
need to work this out.” And just learning to trust people, you know? (Lisa)

**Media.** A couple of women mentioned the influence of various media formats where they were able to obtain information that was helpful in building strength. The following is what was shared.

And then I started listening to like Joyce Myer, um, Joel Osteen, all those pastors on line and they really opened my eyes. I was like “Whoa!, this is not living.” You know? but I-I was still weak and strong which is weird...I would watch TV and I’ll see, okay-I would read books and just listen to what they’re saying and I finally said, “This is not living.” (Lina)

I did a lot of reading and the same thing, like just seeing that there were patterns and reading other people’s stories and seeing, it wasn’t that I felt alone or like that I was the only one that was experiencing this cause I knew, I volunteered in domestic violence shelters before um, but it was just seeing that there’s a pattern and that he was that it was him—like you were saying—that it was him and not me and that he fell into this pattern. (Selina)

**Systems**

**Therapy.** Several women noted having therapists, and while reviews were mixed regarding therapeutic experiences, many women noted the value of therapy in their lives.

I went through a lot of therapy um a lot of like cognitive therapy helped tremendously to help me just kind of see things in a new light, um really see the relationship for what it was...therapy was a huge support...it’s hard to get out and it’s hard to pick yourself back up and you need, you need guidance; you can’t just do it for yourself and you can’t always look around you for support because a lot of those people are your original abusers or they’re in similar situations and they don’t know any better either. (Selina)

I just remember that I have a case manager...and I remember my case manager and my outpatient counselor and stuff telling me, trying to tell me I needed to get out of this relationship and that it was abusive. And they showed me this, this circle of abuse (Vanessa)

Counseling helped a lot because I realized that I’m a horrible boundary setter, so that helped a lot because now I can understand better how to set boundaries and how to deal with people. [through therapy she learned to distinguish between
people who were good for her and those who were not—as mentioned in the supportive people section] (Lisa)

I ended up having to go to a therapist—I was dealing with um, an obsessive compulsive disorder…Um, and I knew that wasn’t right…so I had to go to a specialist for that and she actually specialized in people with eating disorders. But that’s the same um, the-the tools that she gave me are the ones that got me through, that made me start to see things differently. That made me start to recognize (Hope)

I actually ended up finding a counselor who had been in a similar situation so she kind of understood a lot before I even had to delve into it. (Christina)

Shelters. Shelters provided a safe place for women to stay. As previously mentioned, Lina was able to stay for 45 days at a shelter prior to finding her current home. Additionally, shelters offered activities that helped women. For Hayley who’d live in secrecy for so long, this was also a place where she could attempt to open up to others.

I love shelters but the last shelter that I went to, I liked that one because it was like-we were in apartments. It was an apartment building. Nobody knew if you’re in a shelter or not and it was regular apartments and I think, if they made a-a lot of them like that, maybe it will make some women stay…. (Lina)

They had classes you could go to if you wanted, like optional ones, or they’d do activities. So I would go with her [another survivor] and she had a lot of anger she had to get out; and like her drawings and, she was a lot of fun. And about that same time I started to try and talk to people (Hayley)

Police. Some women found the police helpful in the way they responded to their call. Of those who mentioned the police, Christina provided an in depth account of what it was like for her.

When they came that day, um, they got here quick. They took him right away. You know, they got my statement; they got his. Um, they believed every word I said. And his story actually matched mine although he tried to change it later, um, but that too; ‘cause I’ve heard some really bad stories where they get out there and the guy says “oh, I did it in self-defense.” And they believe him and you know, which I don’t know all those circumstances but I just know that, I mean I was treated very, very, very well. Um, you know they were gonna…they initially told me that I would have to go get my order of protection on Monday. Um, this
happened on a Saturday and they said, look you know-’cause at that time he was un-employed and he was watching my son during the days and that’s before I had made the decision to leave and I said, “I can’t, how am I gonna leave work to go down to the court house, get an order of protection, where’s my son gonna be if he’s in jail that day?” you know what. I said, “let me tell you what has happened.” And so they ended up giving me an emergency order of protection too. So um, so just so many, so many things helped.

**Advocates/agencies/attorney/courts.** For some the help they received from advocates and agencies was viewed as an added support, whether it was in the form of having someone to “stand by their side,” attorneys, or other legal assistance. … The follow through and consistent support contributed to the ability of some women to finally extricate themselves from their abusive situation permanently.

I called um, the national domestic violence and they gave me just number, one number, they gave me [a local agency]. So I called and they said that because I’m Jewish, there’s a women there who gives free counseling to Jewish women because somebody’s donating the money for them and I went a couple times and she told me about support groups at [local agency]. (Alice)

The police and the domestic violence lady….she was really good to me, because she would call and say, “Are you still doing okay? Is he contacting you?” So not only was it that first time she helped me through the rest of it too…which was really good because I didn’t want to be like, ‘Uh…he’s living with me again’.

(Lisa)

DV advocate, ‘She’s my mentor. I love her. She found…she helped me find purpose in my life.’ The court proceeding; I was so scared before I walked in, I turned around twice you know and I was “I can’t do this, I can’t do this, I can’t do this a legal advocate …she was right there. (Anne Marie)

Well for me it played a huge role cause I don’t have family here. So like having someone…help you go to court, help you with paperwork, stuff like that. So it-it’s it helps for some of those women that don’t have good close knit families that can help them out. They have a now this great program…a domestic violence program that I kinda I had been in the back of my mind that when things got really, really, really bad I can go upstairs, .. they could help you with either-talk or help me with order of protection, help you with a shelter, so I knew that I had that if things really got bad and I had to leave…. I was glad that I had them to walk me through it (Lina)
Another thing that was so helpful to me was...the victims’ services unit at the police. Um, they were, I mean we talked almost on a daily basis. They listened to my story. They called me um, with the offer they were planning to give my ex and I said, you know, “I don’t agree with this.” They were gonna offer him diversion and I said, you know, “let me tell you the history behind this. You see you know in the paper work what happened that day. Yes, he broke a lot of things, he was violent. You know he didn’t assault me that day. He didn’t put his hands on me that day.” I said, “but let me just tell you some of the things.” They listened. They changed the offer. You know they didn’t allow him any diversion. Um, the prosecutor like stuck with his guns. He would call me personally and say, “you know the defense attorney is saying this.” Um, “are you sure you’re willing to come in and testify?” “is this gonna be too hard for you?” “do you just wanna change the offer?” and he basically put the ball on my court. Which I felt was amazing. I mean, to-for people to even listen to me and really believe everything I said when, I didn’t have pictures of the bruises he put on me. I couldn’t prove that he, you know, tried to strangle me and told me he was gonna kill me. You know, it’s not like I had a video camera taping it. but they believed every word I said. You know, and ah, acted on it and to me that was, that was great for me.

(Christina)

My um, my [mental health] team they set up, they gave transportation to places, that[agency that provided groups] was one place they gave me transportation to because they knew that was part of my support. (Vanessa)

Getting the, trying to get the restraining order on him that was my comfort on saying now he really can’t come over to me and if he does that he’ll be put in jail. (Tylea)

**Barriers to Leaving**

**Personal characteristics, hope that things would change or get better,**

depression. As previously noted, some of the same personal characteristics, qualities, which were a source of strength also presented themselves as a weakness and barrier to leaving. For example, Lina saw her “pit-bull” strength as a source of weakness in thinking she could change him. Many also shared that hope and emotional attachment also kept them in the abusive relationship. The following describes what women in this study had to say with regard to intrapersonal barriers.
I thought I could change him. And that hope, gosh, that hope... The hope, I go with the hope ’cause you’re like, “maybe – maybe if I leave they’ll, he’ll miss me.” And “maybe he will see how good he has it and maybe he will-if he misses me then he will behave.”...I kinda got a little obsessive with it, so, I probably like I said, I probably thought I would change him and I’m very stubborn with it cause somebody else would have been like okay Lina, it’s 2, 3, 4, 5 years, nothing is happening so maybe, maybe you’re not gonna do any- you’re-you’re not gonna change him, but I’m very stubborn with it. So like I said every year, I probably got stronger every year you know and that was always my [goal] every year, “help him.” Just help him you know let us have a better year, not like last year. (Lina)

And you know back at that time it may have been, “oh he’s gonna get clean.” Or “we’re both gonna get clean.” Or “he’ll quit using.” Or you know I may have been some stupid delusion back then, but now I can see maybe it was something else so...part of me thought well my dad changed so maybe he will but...(Natalie)

I didn’t want to come back...with less than I left with, and..., for some reason, it felt like um to leave I needed to come back here. Um so I felt like, until I had more than I left with I can’t go back- it was a big pride thing; Tenacity, in this case...Where in the beginning, I told myself, “I’m not gonna let him get caught by the police.” And I held to that until, until he was gonna kill me. So, tenacity is a huge strength of mine, but it can also be a weakness Sometimes I commit to something and then I’m like, whoa I really don’t want to be following through with this anymore, but I keep going at it because I told myself that I will. (Hayley)

I was emotionally attached to him because we had been through a lot together and we did have a lot of fun together before all of this happened and I was so emotionally attached that’s why I, I couldn’t leave... mainly the emotional attachment that I had to him, because even though I knew that I didn’t want to be in that kind of relationship it was hard to put my emotional caring and love for him just to throw that all away, um because I really did care for him and I, I did want to see him get better (Tylea)

So, the barriers I guess it was just-initially I felt too attached...I was very attached um, to his son and I felt guilty you know because I-I could tell that his relationship with his dad wasn’t good. ‘Cause I mean when he was here, it was me taking care of him. It was me you know playing with him, helping him with homework, picking him up from school, making him his meals. You know, it was me doing all that. And so, um, you know I basically thought about everyone else except for me (Christina)

I can’t be alone. Like this weekend has been hell on earth for me. Because I’m in that apartment by myself. Growing up if you were by yourself you had a target on your back. Somebody was gonna get you somewhere. And trying to work through
that and not get anything to help me out. .. You know I said it; meth is really just not my drug of choice anymore because I don’t want to be up all night thinking about this (Anne Marie)

**Sense of responsibility/not wanting to betray abuser.** As previously noted, several of the women felt they it was their job to help their abusers with their personal issues. As demonstrated, this was sometimes a manipulative tactic that abusers utilized in order to create a sense of obligation/responsibility.

I really, really had the need to help him because he just was screwing up his life, I mean he was dropping out of school, he was hanging with a bad crowd, they were getting him into like drugs and alcohol, and all this stuff, and um I’ve always been the person he falls back on when he screws up. And I always talk him through it and I always try to get him out of these situations, and finally he was at a point where he was doing okay, but when he started dating me he was so much better. And I just tried getting him all the way so that he could be okay by himself. And he just he never become okay, so I had to stay with him, you know? And he’s still not, I realize now he has to figure it out and he has to realize what’s wrong with him, like no one can help him, he has to help himself. So...when I see someone has a problem, I wanna help fix it, you know? I just always have. So that was a big pitfall for me. (Lisa)

It was painful cause in a way I thought like I was giving up on him. Like I was walking away and saying “sorry I can’t help you. (Natalie)

You know and I even thought, “Oh, he needs me. Oh he needs me to help him through this.”  (Christina)

That fear, that fear, that fact that I knew that even his family doesn’t like him. So I kind of felt like almost like his mother you know. I felt bad to betray him. (Alice)

**Shame, embarrassment, and guilt.** Almost all the women acknowledged that at some point they felt shame and guilt, thinking that the abuse was their fault. In part, the guilt was placed upon them through their partners’ blame. For the few who experienced drug addiction, the shame and guilt was amplified.

I was embarrassed too you know. I had been, I’d always been so strong and like, you know I had my daughter in high school and I went through college and I graduated college on my own and I’d done all these things and I was, you know I
was always such a strong person. I didn’t let people push me around like, nobody messed with me you know, I mean that I was like some badass or anything, you know when I dated guys before if they were jerks it was like, “fine see ya!”…I’d never let anyone control me like that and a part of me was ashamed that I let him dictate my life to that point. And what I’d turned into you know? That I’d turned into this child or drug addict victim and I didn’t like it. I didn’t want people to know that’s what I was. I wanted to come off as the strong one. I didn’t want to be weak so...So there’s no doubt that my parents would of helped me but I just didn’t want them to know what I’d done. I didn’t want them to know what I’d become. (Natalie)

The family didn’t, couldn’t support me while I was in...because I wouldn’t tell them what was going on; I was too ashamed, you know? (Carolyn)

I was embarrassed, ashamed. That was the first time I felt like, “I can’t believe this is happening, I’m letting this kind of stuff happen to me.” (Natasha)

**Fear.** Fear took on a life of its own and was a strong barrier to leaving. Women learned to fear their partners based on what they had seen and experienced. Since they learned to take their partners’ threats seriously, it made it difficult to leave the relationship. They not only feared for their lives, but also feared for the lives of their children.

The fear. The fear. I was afraid he’s gonna hurt them in order to revenge me. Because these things, um, in the papers all the time. I was afraid that he’s gonna pay somebody, because he could afford it. To find me or even to kill me, which I’m still not in the clear. I’m mean 99% I am, but with people like this you never know...And when somebody can afford it, it’s way more scary. Like I have an alarm, security alarm here and people ask you, “why do need a security alarm on the 4th floor?” and I say, “because of my crazy ex-husband.” and that fear was a big barrier to me. I was afraid for my kids more than for me. (Alice)

But even after that, I mean he left bruises on my arm in that incident and even after that it’s like I didn’t-I didn’t leave. You know? But at that point it wasn’t because I felt like I needed to be with him or whatever it was-I was too afraid. (Christina)

I was frightened more than anything had ever frightened in my life to this day, because of his violent nature...I can’t even describe the fear and the anxiety you know, I mean all I looked like that year, all I did when he would go to work was he’d leave out the door and then I’d head to the bathroom and have to just throw
up, you know. It was, that was that much fear and I just prayed every day, “Please
don’t let him see that there’s a change in the routine or that there’s a change in me
or that there’s a change going on,” I say, “because,” like I say he was very
inquisitive, and if he started investigating and looking in closets or looking in the
old car you know he would know that, that I had something planned. (Carolyn)

I was weak, I mean, I remember when I went, when I first went to file for divorce,
I-like the –the court house were like where my fridge is [describing the distance to
the court house] and I couldn’t even go. I couldn’t even go to the courthouse to
file for divorce. That’s how hold the fear had on me. ‘Cause here you are,
somebody’s doing all these terrible things to you and you can’t I mean, you would
think I’d be running in there. I couldn’t, I couldn’t even go to file for divorce. So,
when, I-I’m very, very sympathetic for women and men going through this but
you have to, if somebody tells me that they’ve it took them all this time to leave,
I’m like, “It’s okay.” It’s that time you finally do leave, that’s what counts. Don’t
worry about how many times it took you ‘cause we each have our-we’re all
different. Some women, yeah, some women may take them one time and some
could take them up to 10 for them to leave...but I think it’s the fear (Lina)

I was too afraid to leave him on my own. I, I didn’t feel like I had it in me or, or
something for whatever reason I just, I couldn’t find it. (Hayley)

And you know he’d offer to let me stay there. He’d be like, “just stay here.” But
that probably wasn’t any better situation at the time but you know I was so scared
that he would find me anyway that-you know and if he found me he’d kill him
and you know it just wouldn’t—it wouldn’t be any better. (Natalie)

**Lack of awareness.** Lack of awareness kept the women in their violent situations.

Additionally, not knowing what an abusive relationship was also became a barrier to
leaving.

But the main thing I would say, “But, but he’s not hitting me, so it can’t be
abuse.” And I really um, I, I put, the thing I put with abuse was physical.
(Vanessa)

I wish I would’ve found that sooner [speaking of group] but honestly I didn’t
think to myself, “I’m in a horrible domestic violence situation.” I didn’t think of it
that way. I thought “oh my marriage isn’t going well.” Because that’s what I was
being told. You know? “Oh every marriage has problems” (Christina)

I had trouble identifying myself as a victim or even as—in a situation of domestic
violence because I was never hit but—so it took me a long time to get past that
realization or even to you know get past the denial. (Hope)
Intimidation and escalating violence. As previously mentioned, certain dynamics existed in these relationships that created an imbalance of power and control favoring the abusers. As a result some women were viewed as property, as in Alice’s case, “He wouldn’t let me get away. He told me I belong to him.” Lies were told and survivors were isolated from family and support and in some cases were provided drugs. Also, when women tried to think about leaving, they weren’t given time to think. Abusers were described as manipulative and able to create dependence via controlling behavior; at times this controlling behavior included dangerous levels of violence and threats that presented as barriers for the women.

I was just talking to this kid, like-this kid was in high school. I mean I was 27 years old and he pulled a gun out on this kid and like, told him if he ever talked to me again...and when we went home that night, that was probably the worst night and like he held a gun to my head and he had me pit against the wall and I broke like three ribs that night. (Natalie)

There was a time when he, I tried to leave and get out of the bed room and he actually came at me, put his hands around my throat, had me backed into the closet and said, “if you try to leave right now I will kill you.” And I could tell in his eyes he was serious and so I-I couldn’t get out. Um, he wouldn’t even let me get to my phone because I was gonna call the police and um, so that was kind of like the height of how bad it got. (Christina)

…A gun cleaning ritual. And he had a 357 magnum from the time we were first together, and that 357 magnum he would take that out every single night and clean it in front of the family, it was like a family ritual, but it was actually you know a, a subliminal message to all of us that ‘you do what I say or this is what happens’ you know? (Carolyn)

When we got home I was like, “just don’t touch me, I really wanna think about things.” And I’m really starting to get scared and I just, I wanna think, I wanna be by myself. And he, he did not want me to have any time to think about leaving him. I mean he sat there and made me have sex with him. While I’m on medication, while I’m re- just got stitched a couple hours ago. I remember just sitting there crying while he’s doing stuff to me and I’m medicated and I’m hurting so I can’t really move around and so he’s doing it just because he can and it…I remember how ugly that felt. Like I was just like…but that became so
recurring that it became a normal. (Natasha)

Every time we were alone, um I was at risk. Um, he started bringing in more strangers. Started talking about more violent things...Having people rape me more...his you know, fantasies got worse....I tried to leave once. I tried to tell him, you know, this has got to stop, I can’t take this stuff anymore. “You gotta be more helpful around the house.” “You gotta help me.” Um, “I’m not here to wait on you hand and foot.” Um, and I think he would try a little bit; I mean he’d get angry and then he would get defiant. And he would sit and tell me, “I’m never gonna help you with the house. Never gonna do this.” I’m never gonna do that. He came home one day and he took all of the um, just like a lot of married couples we had you know, sex toys or whatever and he took the things that were okay and he started angrily tossing them into the burn barrel and started burning them. And he was telling me, he was angry and telling me, “Look what I’m doing for. Look what you’re making me do. Look what I’m willing to do for you!” and he was angry about it and his-his anger just got worse. He became more resentful, he stopped-he stopped bathing because if I asked him to brush his teeth cause he smoked you know, then I was, um I was the bad person. I was “mean” and I was “vindictive” and I was a “bitch.” You know? Um, and he did everything he could to try to get the control back. (Hope)

I would always excuse it if it was just verbal or emotional, it’s like, “Oh, I can handle this. At least he’s not beating me.” So for like 3 years I stuck with him because oh he wasn’t beating me, it wasn’t that bad. He just went overboard and then one day, I had lived in a studio apartment, he trapped me in my apartment one night—he trapped me there all night, he just beat the crap out of me and every time I tried to get to the door, he would block the door, and I was like screaming. And, but the apartment that I had was separated from all the other apartments, so nobody could hear me that first time, the second time it happened they heard me, but the first time they couldn’t hear me. So nobody came, and it was all night long, well it was like most of the night, and then finally, finally he was like, “Come on, let’s lay down and go to sleep.” (Vanessa)

I was completely isolated, the only person I talked to was him...I didn’t even talk to my family and I’m a very big family person like I talked to them every day and I hadn’t talked to them for months. There was a night...he ended up saying, “your family hates you. I’m the only one that would ever want you.” And I realized how far he was in my head. (Lisa)

I was completely isolated...living across the U.S. from my family, working with him, having no social life. (Hayley)

I had been sober for probably 4 or 5 years, but he had been using off and on. And so of course he pulled me into that a little bit, so I was using here and there, just because he would want me to use with him. So that made me more accepting of
the behavior as well (Vanessa)

And the drug use—you know even though I—you know I wanted to get clean and I wanted to stay away that was probably a big obstacle was that I was still so in it that, I couldn’t get clean on my own...I don’t think we could ever be together and not get high. Our whole relationship when we were together was based on drugs. It was based on using and but for some reason you know that stupid thinking in my head ah, for a while was just, “oh maybe it would work.” You know part of me wanted to be the save him person, you know I was –I wanted to make him a good guy and save him and like, and I’ve realized now that I can’t, you know that’s his choice. (Natalie)

I guess another barrier was of him coming and finding me and you know I don’t know, it’s just weird to me. I didn’t want that to happen, so I guess that was a barrier too. (Tylea)

As previously noted in Lisa’s case, her abuser lived with them for a time and she noted that was barrier for her as she felt responsible for his well-being since he claimed to have been kicked out of his home. Additionally, he would say things like “I thought you loved me?” to test her loyalty and used this to control and manipulate her into doing what he wanted. He also lied to her by telling her that everyone hated her were means to isolate her from family and other support. He had become a staple in her life and this too was perceived as a barrier.

He got a job at where I was living so like he put down his roots, you know? And I don’t know, he became like best friends with all my coworkers and they just expected him to come around, so just the fact that I would have to explain to them why he wasn’t coming anymore was hard because I don’t really like sharing my personal life with my coworkers, so I didn’t want to tell them, “Yeah, we broke up,” you know? I just felt really lame in that regard, and just the fact that I felt like I had no one. Like I felt like no one liked me, that no one even wanted to see my face anymore, like he was the only person that would ever talk to me anymore, because I was excluding myself, but I didn’t realize that...Like he would come and be at my work for my whole shift. And like he would come to church with me, he would go and like come and eat breakfast and lunch with me at school, and he would like, he was everywhere.

In Selina’s case, having bought a home with her abuser made it difficult to get out of
the relationship.

Yeah, specifically one of them [barriers] was that um...they were all things that he put up. Um like one of them he would, was when we were um buying the house. Um I put the money down, I put $500 earnest money down on the house and um it was in both of our names, at that point, but the money was from me. And I would have had to, I went and I was like, “Okay...I don’t want this house anymore. Can I get my money back?” And they’re like, “Yeah. Here sign this and then have, you know, your ex sign this too.” And um so I went to him, I’m like, “You need to sign this.” And he wouldn’t sign it, and he wouldn’t sign it, and he wouldn’t sign it, and he’s like, “I’ll sign it if you get back together with me.” And, and so I did. And then um, you know, and then things were great- honeymoon period, and we decide, “Oh we don’t need to have, you know, take your name off of this. We’re gonna go through and we’re gonna get this house together.

**Family and friends.** While family (e.g., parents, in-laws) was described as social support, in some cases the women described that they them to be a hindrance to leaving. Sometimes it was due to lack of knowledge and other times they minimized the abusers’ behaviors, or placed blame on the women.

Um, my parents never understood anything about DV and I said, “Look how sorry he is” and my parents never liked him for many reasons. And they said well, “You wanted to marry him, so now go to live with him and we don’t think he’s gonna ever do it again because look how sorry he is.” So I went back. But in the back of my mind I knew I don’t have a backup. (Alice)

I confided in his mom a lot which is strange because she-I mean she let it all go. I mean she just let it all happen and told me, “Oh every marriage has its problems.” the only person I was completely honest with throughout this was his mom and she was the one-but she made it easy for me to tell her these things because she would always just make excuses....she said, “well you know, Christina I think you just need to think about if you have postpartum depression because that’s what it seems like to me.” And that—it—it sounds weird but that made it really clear in my mind that she was not a friend. Because she knew very well that’s not what was going on. You know? And you know it’s not like I was in and out of jobs. It’s not like I wasn’t the one being able to function. I mean she had been over here and witnessed, right after an incident you know where I would have tears streaming down my face and I would go to answer the door and he would be sitting there acting like nothing was wrong. And she’d just kind of look at me and that’s like so she knew very well what was going on. (Christina)

There were also times when family removed support as in the following example.
My mom made it harder. I think people turning their back on me because they felt, because I think she was really scared, that I was gonna stay with him. So she really, really pushed me away. She kicked me out of my house. She um, accused me of being everything that he was, a drug addict and that I was all kinds of things…so that sometimes made me wanna run back and just hide in his arms and run away from everyone else…. (Natasha)

Other times family support meant going back to a home where childhood abuse was experienced.

And I…my mom is still married to her husband, he did 15 years in prison. So leaving meant staying with them and in the same house. Ugh! And it’s a bad situation. So I never made it past a couple of days. Yeah, my upbringing was not pleasant. The only recourse I had out of that relationship was to return to those people and just “no!” I really didn’t want to do that. It was rock and a hard place. (Anne Marie)

A lack of supportive friendships was also recognized as a barrier.

I didn’t really have any friends up there weren’t involved with him, that wouldn’t have called him and said, “hey, she’s here.” And so in a way I felt like I was stuck sometimes. I mean I would leave but I would always—it would be for an hour or two and then I’d go back and I’d go back…I had nowhere to go. I mean I did but I thought I didn’t—you know at that time I didn’t think anyone would take me (Natalie)

High regard for the abuser also played a role. In Natasha’s situations, family and friends liked her former partner and had no knowledge of what was occurring

Like everyone loved him. Everyone loved him. I mean they, adored him. . I mean even my mom was like, you know, “you should stay with him.” I mean everyone was supportive cause everyone saw how great he was with me. And th…and that support from everyone else made me even more in love with him because it was like “wow!” this—this completes everything you know. It satisfies my mom, and it satisfies...you know, everyone says I look perfect with him and, it was just like the perfect picture.

**Finances.** Several women noted that due to financial responsibility or lack of access to finances they found themselves with little choice but to stay with their partners.

The following presents what women had to say.
I was working but I didn’t have a whole lot of money. So the thought of me trying to find a place on my own and how I was gonna pay for everything and pay for my kids and move my kids and that was probably a big one. (Natalie)

With not having any family out here I mean once I had moved in with him, it’s not exactly easy to decide oh, okay, you know I’ve got a mortgage on this house—cause I own this house. Okay so I’m gonna keep paying the mortgage on this house and go—you know—pay another you know apartment. Plus I still got the bills for this house. You know? And so it was just like. It was never…it’s just not easy. (Christina)

It takes a lot of money to move across the U.S. That was the biggest barrier…the money and the pride of having to ask my parents for help, like, “Can you find an apartment for me?” (Hayley)

Once we had the house then there were, you know, the financial barriers, like I need him to live here with me and pay me rent, and then it just got to the point where he hadn’t paid me anything at all for several months, so that’s when I was like, “He’s not paying me anyway so why should I let him come back? (Selina)

**Therapy.** While some women had positive therapeutic experiences, others noted negative experiences that were not helpful. Hope and Hayley described this experience.

I’ve had therapist—my first therapist that I went to and I was telling about this—her jaw literally dropped when I—and she was horrified and she didn’t handle things well and she didn’t know. Like I said it took me a long time to even find a therapist who was um, I don’t wanna say qualified but who was able to help me correctly. Um, because just talking about it isn’t the issue um, and I think that people don’t know to help you get all of that stuff out…. [she] tried to tell me you know, “what you went through was abuse.” And I wasn’t able to accept at that time, but I remember the first thing she did was have me contact an attorney ,, cause she told me, “you need to go back to court.” “You need to have this, you need to look at this and press charges.” Which is not at all what I wanted to do but I contacted an attorney. (Hope)

The counselor, I didn’t even like her..... I’m like, “You’re a jerk, like I don’t even like you.” Like she wouldn’t even listen to me at like, I’d try and talk to her, and I didn’t ask for much, I’d ask for like a towel, and, and a little tiny, I think that’s all I asked for.. She was just a jerk. (Hayley)

**Clergy/spiritual leaders.** In Hope’s case, she described the lack of support she received from spiritual leaders she sought out, of this she said, “I’ve looked for help from
pastors um, and I’ve had pastors that run from me; avoid me because they don’t know how to deal with it.”

**Shelter.** The overcrowding and inability to get needed sleep made this experience unpleasant for Hayley.

So then, here’s the interesting thing, the women’s shelter was like horrible,, it’s overcrowded, there’s people with HIV all over, so you have to be very careful. Um, um the room I was in was um supposed to be a capacity of four, we had one bathroom. There was six of us in the room and every room was like that. And um I worked graveyards at this hotel and so I’d try and sleep there during the day and there would be kids screaming so I never got any sleep. And I just felt like this was an endless hell...of being in this place.

**Police.** At times the police and their procedures for dealing with DV became an obstacle for women. One woman explicitly noted that was a reason why she went back to her abuser. As a result of prior negative experience (e.g., being charged with DV themselves) some women were afraid to call the police again - they lacked trust in the police, and had a sense that the police would be unhelpful.

I called the cops on my boyfriend at the time, but I was scared that he was gonna get mad at me for calling the cops and so I said, “I don’t want you to arrest him. I don’t want you to arrest him” and they arrested me, I got charged with it, I got a domestic violence charge not him....when I talked to the attorney, the district attorney and I said, ‘I did this[took the blame] because I was scared: and they said, “well you admitted you’re the aggressor.” I know there are women who have done that, like taking the blame because they were scared of what the person was gonna do to them.” I had reached our for help, I was the one who called the police I was the one who told them he was hurting me and I was the one who got arrested, I was the one who went to jail not him. It made me scared because it was like how are we really helping women...They gave my boyfriend at the time all these papers on where to go for help… but me I was treated like, I told the district attorney when I went to court I took the blame cause I was scared…it didn’t matter. (Natalie)

I saw that when the cops were involved with us, I mean he’s not the smartest guy and he actually brought the cops to my house when he was an abuser so that was kinda his own fault but he was out of control cause he came to get his stuff and I had all his stuff for him but he wanted more than just his. He wanted the stuff that
he had claimed of mine and I had to hand it all over. The cops made me hand everything over ‘cause they don’t know what’s going on...and the fact that he took my property I had to see him again to get it back so they gave him more to manipulate me again so it continued because I got back in the situation. (Lisa)

I’d only called the police on him one time before in seven years, I didn’t call the police ‘cause I did not trust the police. My stepdad was a police. I did not trust police for anything and I, because I did the trial with my stepdad, there was no way I was gonna go through it again. It’s an ugly, horrible process and you know they think you have this vindication as a victim, okay yes, you know “justice has been served,” and that’s just not the case. It’s really not! So I knew that I was never gonna press charges, wasn’t gonna follow through and I hated police, so I never called them. (Anne Marie)

He tried to get the police to arrest me because he said...I was trying to sell him pills...but he broke into my apartment trying to steal my pills, my pain pills,...And so they look up my record and I have this long arrest record, and he doesn’t barely have any kind of a record so they come in all questioning me and I got bloody face, all beat up, and stuff. And this, just this one, the other cops were nice, but just this one older cop, he was all like interrogating me and stuff about my pills that “I was trying to sell”...And I was like, “Yo, I didn’t do anything wrong,” I’m like, “This is not what happened,”...I was really upset about that, but I did press charges against him and he went to jail. (Vanessa)

They [the police] wouldn’t have helped me, they would have hurt me more...I know this sounds so messed up but it’s true they wouldn’t, they don’t know what they are dealing with. (Hayley)

Advocates/agencies/attorney/courts. While there were many positive experiences described, at times these systems did not offer the type of support that would have helped women. Other times the issue was the lack of agencies that were geared at helping women.

I didn’t get an advocate ‘cause...it was still pretty rural at that point so they didn’t have a really big advocacy program....but just it was my “advocate” showed up for court and sat next to me and unlocked the little room where I could and watch the proceedings, you know the separate room and that was about it. Like she didn’t really explain the court system to me too much, um, she didn’t really put me in touch with resources-she didn’t-she just was a body to unlock this door for me. (Selina)

The first time I went and did it [get an order of protection]...oh, I was like
exhausted cause I went-I did it by myself. So that system, I didn’t help. I think they should make it a little easier on women when they go. (Lina)

If I could have you know had places like this place [women’s resource center] you know, that I would have had a little more courage, but because me having all the children I felt like, “Well I got myself into this so now it’s my duty to get myself out.” And it was a, it was like you know grabbing a hold and not getting a grip because I was trying to do it myself, yeah. So I, I just wish I had known that there were more…agencies or referrals or that you know places where you can get the kind of help that I needed. …like I said the only thing that came into my life was CPS, and of course I felt like they failed me (Carolyn)

The attorney said to me over the phone, “Sweet heart, you’re going to court and it’s gonna be ‘he-said she-said’ and the court’s gonna think that you were a willing partner and they’re not gonna see things your way-so chalk it up to bad experience and go find a nice guy.”…that’s what the attorney said to me and of course you know, that-so that was it for me. There was no way I was gonna deal with any type of situation like that. but that-that’s a horrible way…you know, I still am so angry with that guy and I wanna just-I-if I could remember his name-I’d called up and say, “you jack ass!” but yeah, I know that there are certain elements where um, the court system and the judicial system doesn’t really recognize things fully and treat victims properly. (Hope)

When discussing the legal system Vanessa stated:

Well, I had him arrested, okay. He got put in jail, then, he got released. Then he broke the restraining order, got arrested again, because he didn’t go to court…Then they released him on a mental health...like um- I don’t know technicality, or whatever; like because he has a mental illness he doesn’t have to be responsible for his actions, kinda slap on the wrist thing, because you’re mentally ill. I’m like, “So I’m mentally ill too, do I get to beat him?” you know, what the heck? You know? So I mean it was very frustrating in that sense because he was like trying to torture me at the same time I was trying to get him put in jail, and um, but there was like nothing I could do. He’d like threaten; he’d threaten me with a gun, like verbally threaten me with a gun, with a text message. I took it up there to show the judge, they looked at it and they gave him a really high bond, so they kept him in jail for a little while, but then they let him out on a mental health technicality because he got his case manager to come in there and say, “Yeah, he’s mentally ill.”

**Overcoming obstacles/barriers.** Overcoming obstacles involved survivors utilizing their sources of inner strength, getting assistance from their available support systems, reconnecting, and being resilient. Part of overcoming obstacles was speaking
about the abuse. Lisa noted the following.

I ended up telling my coworkers that he’s just not gonna come anymore and they suspected things, but often because they knew that the cops were involved and they were supportive. Like he ended up coming in at one point and like my coworker came up and whispered in my ear, “Do you want me to get him to leave?” And so they had my back and that was good to see. And then I started talking to my friends and family again, so at least I had someone there, you know? And um I just had to stop worrying about whether he was going to do school or not, I just had to stop worrying about him, which is hard, but I moved on with my life; I ended up moving up here when I started coming to college, like it’s a big deal. Not only did I retransform my life in those couple months, but I moved up here and totally changed my whole environment.

Similarly Natasha speaks of no longer keeping the abuse hidden and speaking the truth.

The way I really got out was admitting the truth. It’s no longer saying I tripped over something or hiding it from my mom, or hiding it. I hid everything until the last one. But the last one I had a black eye, a busted nose, a bruised neck, a bruised tail bone, um, a broken-this finger broken [showing finger] my wrist was sprained, so, I really couldn’t hide it at that point. And that point I said, I knew it was gonna be over when I told the truth to everyone, especially my mom cause I knew my mom would never allow us to be together again...in peace, if I told her the truth. So, when I made the decision to call her, right after...he hit me. I called the cops and I called my mom. And I had never called the cops before...never.

Hope spoke of sharing some of the information; however she did not reveal the details of the abuse.

Um, so they know that I was sexually abused. Um, I haven’t shared this story. I don’t paint any pictures for them, so, they don’t know the intensity. Um, I have an older son who keeps thinking that one day I need to tell him and one who doesn’t want to know anything...I did the best that I could because I wanted them to still have a relationship with their father based on what their father was to them not what he did to me...but um, I did finally also share some with my parents. Um, they also know that I was sexually abused, again I didn’t paint any pictures for them so there’s always, there’s still an element of secrecy...but I also know that because my story is a little more unique, and because...I also know that because of the world that he put me into that there are other women like me who are dealing with this.

Christina shared:
I’m not alienating myself anymore and I can be open with people. Um, and tell people what happened, it’s just completely…it’s like I’m an open book now. Whereas before, people knew this much [demonstrates small amount with fingers] of me, of my, of what really went on. You know? And I put on such a fake show…’cause I felt like that’s what I had to do and now it’s like people know everything.

Carolyn began to tell her story.

I accidentally picked up a camera one day [laugh] and uh I started videotaping so my oldest son decided, “Mom we should do your story.” I always wanted, what I always wanted to do was to put my story down in the, in the form of a book or, or you know video so that my children could see my story and understand what happened. I didn’t want them to guess.

In addition to telling her story she noted that receiving help from a women’s center helped provide the preparation she needed to overcome obstacles she faced.

When I first came to this center...they um they put me through classes for self-esteem, for bankruptcy, for um budgeting - you know all the things, all the tools that I needed to try to get me to open up and understand that you know life was not like that [experiencing abuse], this is what you have to do to survive with these children.

For Lina, facing her fear and relying on her faith and what she gained from on-line spiritual leaders helped her overcome.

Facing fear like I said, I started listening to those pastors, praying, I always prayed...and then she kept saying, [referring to Joyce Myer] “Do it afraid, don’t worry about it, do it afraid.” I’m like, I know but, I’m still afraid, I mean, just-shutting down my computer at work, that day that I left, just shutting down the computer, walking-it was just on the second floor-just walking going on the second floor and asking the lady, “can I speak to a domestic violence advocate?” That was like, I had-like I was gosh that was like, I was still afraid. I was like shivering so, that fear man. I can’t explain it.

In addition to belief that she was being taken care of by God, Alice noted,

“Basically, support groups. Support groups were my everything. It empowered me, it gave me security…. I’m a great believer in support groups.”
Christina also described how her son helped her overcome barriers in her life.

It was really my son being born...it got down to the point where it was like, if he kills me my son won’t have a mom. And I think it was just my love for him that made me realize I deserve a lot better than how I’m being treated and so that was the turning point for me. I just-I swear it was like that day, um, it was like a switch flipped and the night when he went, that night before when he went to that party I did go to my close friend’s house and I told her basically everything. You know and I knew after a while he would settle back down and it would be like okay, ‘we’ll just prepare for the next big blow up.’ But after my son was born it was like, I can’t, I’m not gonna do that to him.

For Hayley, dealing with her pride and other supports helped her overcome.

Well, when [he] punched me in the head 17 times, at that point I was pretty well convinced that I was going to end up dead if I stayed. And so it became a matter of getting over my pride for the sake of my own life. And then the other women at the shelter…the other women. And then the, then the friends I’d try to start connecting with.

Vanessa shared how she overcame the legal barrier in her life:

Well you know, I stuck with it, and just I made sure I did not miss a court date- I went to every court date, and I got him the toughest sentence I could get him, which really wasn’t much. They gave him like time serve which he had, had spent probably a month or two in jail, which I know that was torture any time in jail is torture. But, and he got some like probationary period and stuff like this. But you know, I knew that I did what I could to stand up for myself- that was the most important thing. I went to every court date, even though he had his new girlfriend come there and sit on the other side across from me, you know? It was so annoying. And so I made sure I always came there stick up for myself, because somebody had to have a say. If I would not have showed up at one court date, they would have released him. I showed up every court date, I, I had talked to the prosecutor every time

Life after Leaving

Staying Out

Sources of support. Multiple attempts were noted to be part of the leaving process as evidenced above. When I asked these women what they considered to be
important in eventually leaving their situation permanently, many again pointed to support (e.g., therapy), making conscious efforts to stay away, children, and recognizing accomplishments. In the following, Vanessa explained what she did to disconnect and move on and away from the abuse.

I don’t know where he went, I was like, “I don’t want to know, I just want to disconnect from this situation. I just want to say my piece and then be done with it.” I erased the phone numbers from my phone because I didn’t want that, in case I wanted to text and say something, I didn’t want to be able to do that, so I just erased the phone numbers, I couldn’t do that. And um I, I did what I needed to do, and that was I needed to stand up for myself. The more I stood up for myself, the more I, the stronger I felt, and stronger, and the more I felt I was able to stay away from him...Well you know, I got a therapist and stuff and she’s like, “Well you just need to stay out of relationships for a while because you don’t know how to have a healthy relationship.” Okay well so, she was right, you know?

She also went on to describe how important the support group was in eventually helping her leave.

The support group was really, really helpful because every week I went back there and I could talk about how I had those feelings that I wanted to go back to him, how I just felt like I shouldn’t because it was bad for me, and how they were very supportive and you know, “you need to stay strong” and they were all like you know, “You need to just...it’s normal to have those feelings, a lot of us feel like the same way, like we want to go back, but it’s a normal feeling to have when you’re leaving him.” They told me it was normal, it’s a common feeling, so then I know I’m not feeling alone... Some of these women were survivors, had gone through it in the past, and some were going through the situation at the present time.

Additionally, Vanessa also credited the support group with helping her stay out as she noted in the following.

I went there every week. They helped, they helped a lot...helped me stay out of it because they all understood, and they were all going through the same thing. The feelings that I felt were like, “I loved him, but I hated him,” I just kept wanting to reach out and go back to him, but I knew I had stay away. These conflicting feelings were really difficult to deal with and it was hard because you, you kept wanting to go back, but you knew you needed to stay away. And that staying
away part was the hard part, and you needed to do it for your own self. And there was a room full of women feeling the same thing, and we would talk about it, and talk- and then he would try and contact me, I had a restraining order, we could talk about that, it was support, it was good support. And I went to that every week for probably like 6 months, I went...I found that on my own because I knew I needed some support with it because I was having a hard time just staying away on my own. It was difficult, it is difficult because you have all these conflicting feelings, you’re like, “This doesn’t…” it feels, it feels weird because you hate him, but you love him at the same time, and you know you’re not supposed to want to be with him but you do. It, it’s like this isn’t right.

Christina had a similar experience in that she found support groups helpful in staying out and in her recovery.

Getting support—I’ve been going to a support group for over a year now which has just been absolutely wonderful. I mean just-that’s the best thing I could’ve done for me in my recovery.

Alice found the support of co-workers, friends, her daughters, and support group helpful.

Now I have a lot of support, I you know, my work people and everything and my friends and um, my daughters. I have a lot of support now but you know, it never goes away. Now I know, I know this domestic violence is never going away from the back of my mind, never gonna leave me. You know what I mean? There’s always triggers. I will hear somebody say something and I will say, “yeah, I heard it too.” You know? This was said to me too but-but I have the tools now and this is why a support groups is so good about, I have the tool on how to deal with it.: and how to make it go away quick and it doesn’t come up much.

Similarly, Lisa spoke of supportive people helping her stay out and how a friend helps her continue to develop needed skills to stay abuse free:

Getting people to support you, it’s really hard to do it alone. If you do it alone, you’ll probably end up back in the situation. I think you need outward support, because sometimes you just need someone to help pull you out of the hole...there was like my mom, my friend, the police, and the domestic violence lady.” “…I’ve always been a good people person, but I think that just the support of my friends and um I met just this really awesome chick up here, and she had gotten out of an abusive relationship and so me and her are very open with each other; we actually live together, she’s my best friend. And um just, we talked about everything…we’re very open, and we say, ‘Hey, you know, you’re doing this and I’m not, I’m not comfortable with it’...And just having her as my baseline and being able to
practice with her, when I’m in situations where usually I’d be uncomfortable because I don’t know the person very well, it’s easier to say, ‘Hey, that’s not okay,’...because I have developed that skill enough with her.”

Tylea also speaks of the influence of friendships and realizing she deserved a better relationship.

Putting myself with better friends, um not having the negative or um like bad influences I guess. But um just realizing that I’m worth a lot more than that and I deserve to be happy and I deserve a lot better relationship than what I have had.

As with Alice, Natasha’s children helped her stay out permanently and keep moving forward.

The boys…I was like, they have no fault in this. I can’t subject them to this. They’ve been through enough....I said I can’t do this to him [her eldest son], I can’t do this to him; I’m not going to allow him to see this more than once. This is the first time they’re seeing me like this. If they see me do this again they’re gonna think it’s okay. And that way I was like, “I will never...” I told myself that day, “I will never, ever, let them see me like this again.” And they didn’t. It was that 100%. Every time that I would think about seeing him [her abuser] again, every time that my heart said “maybe he’s not lying.” I would think about my kids face that day and said, “I can’t do it.” “I can’t do it.” For them. They were my 100% drive.

Children also played a role in Carolyn’s decision to eventually leave. She shared the following:

I think when my daughter expressed to me, “Mom I was gonna run away. I was gonna take her [younger sibling] and, and, and put her in my arms and run out that,...there’s lots of woods and green, and like you know you would go in there and get lost.”...and I felt like, “This is a baby that’s taking a stand,” you know for her life and the life of somebody else- she’s taking a stand. And I say, “This is my time to take a stand,” you know. So then that’s when I began hoarding what I felt that I would need in order to, the day it comes, when I had to grab it, I’m gonna grab it and I’m gonna take my kids.

For Selina, what helped her stay out was the following.

I was thinking about it and another reason why I think I was able to get out once I realized I was in an abusive situation was that I had a relatively good early
childhood. I don’t know much about attachments beyond what I learned at [local agency], but I am pretty sure that my dad was my primary attachment figure and we had a really great relationship. My mom was relatively sane until the divorce, so I had a lot of nurturing that my sister (who was born during the divorce) didn’t.

**Sources of empowerment.** Women also noted that feeling empowered helped them stay out and feel better about themselves, as they gained the support they needed, recognized accomplishments, and actively engaged in efforts that would keep them out of their abusive relationships. Selina spoke about her sources of pride, in addition to recognizing who she has become that helped her stay out and live abuse free.

Just emotional accomplishments, like I don’t feel like I’ve accomplished a lot of stuff like I don’t have a degree, I don’t make a million dollars, I’m not president of a company, um you know, I don’t have a family, I don’t have a husband, you know things like that. I don’t look at those things, I just look at who I used to be and who I am now and just, I have you know I’m capable of a lot more honesty now, I’m capable of um recognizing when I’m unhappy and getting, and I’m capable of taking the steps to make myself happy again, um I’m capable - making really good decisions, um I’m capable of a lot more creativity because I’m not so bogged down by you know worrying if it’s gonna set somebody off or um if it’s not good enough for so and so or for you know anything like that. .. Yeah, yeah you don’t have anything to show for it but you have you to show for it, you know. A shining example of how awesome you are, which I like, I’m so like I’m so impressed with myself like I, I can come off as just like— if you let me—come off as just the most conceited person ever, but I’m so proud of who I’ve become. I, I just think about that every day like, “Good for you, Selina, because there were some times when you didn’t think you would be able to get this far, or you didn’t even know that this far was possible.

Natalie noted she still felt guilty and obligated to write him letters while he was in prison, however after having a dream she was finally able to let it go.

I still felt guilt about everything with him, he was in prison and I wasn’t. I thought I had let it go and everything but I had this dream…I was there, it was the same situation, where he was coming home and doing what he did to me and then leaving me and cheating on me and in this dream it was like, all the pain and I woke up and I was like, ‘what the hell was I doing?’ like at that moment I finally let it go. It was kinda weird…feeling everything again in some weird way, it was like, ‘yeah, I’m done.’ And I haven’t had like the temptation or whatever to have
any contact with him again….before that I still felt like guilty like I should be writing letters….since then, I haven’t had that at all.

Sources of empowerment also included school, the act of leaving the relationship, making better choices, and being in a healthy relationship. In the following Vanessa describes below how standing up for herself helped her feel empowered.

I, every time he harassed me and I had proof, like a voicemail or text message something, I called the police, and report, make a report because he was on a restraining order. Um it was just a matter of, the main thing was empowering myself by sticking up for myself. Because you know, you can’t get over that kind of situation or get out of it if you don’t empower yourself some way. And I think the best way for me to empower myself was sticking up for myself and that was going to court and saying, you know, “You can’t get away with doing this to me.” Because he thought he could, by telling the police that it was me, not him. He thought he was gonna get away the whole time…he tries to blame me, and get me arrested so I go and stand up for myself—that’s the best way I can empower myself, is stand up for myself. That made me feel the best I think, even though I was very angry that he got off on a mental health technicality.

Additionally, she was going to college and had a job and noted the roles these played in feeling empowered.

Working, because well for one I’ve hardly worked in my life up until like 3 years ago, and then I got a job and I’ve actually been able to hold a job, full, and I work fulltime and I’ve, and I’ve got promotions and I’m actually like- it’s weird when I get promotions sometimes it’s like, “Did they actually know what they hired me to do? Did they even think that I can do this?” And then I know I can do this, you know, but it’s like, “Did they know who I am?” that’s why it’s, I’m like, I don’t know, it’s weird, because I, I’ve come from so far down and ridden so far up that it’s just like, “Do they even know who I…” it’s weird. But working gives me a great sense of empowerment because I’m able to support my family.... So, anyways me being able to support my family, support myself alone, but support a whole family gives me a great sense of accomplishment. And I almost have my associates degree, Now I have almost enough for my associates in computer technology. And my main thing was to get an associate’s degree in something because I needed to get that sense of accomplishment that I, I, because I know I was always really smart in school but then I started doing drugs, and, and it was a really bad drug that really did a lot of damage to my brain cells and stuff like that. So my functioning, my capacity for functioning in the brain is not as good as it was when I was younger. So for me to even go as far as I have now I feel is real
good, and I’m on, I’m on the honor society, the phi theta kappa, I’m in with them, yup. So I’m getting all A’s in my classes right now so, you know, I feel just a sense of accomplishment

Tylea’s source of empowerment was three fold; she first described better choice in relationship.

Well the healthy relationship that I’m in now um you know we didn’t start dating right off, we took more time to get to know each other and that helps a lot…I guess with just me and him, I feel empowered when I know that things are going you know good and that you know this is what a healthy relationship feels like. I feel like you know whether it turns out for me or him or it doesn’t, it’s you know a good eye opener for me to feel empowered to have um to know that not everybody is like my ex, not every relationship is like that, there are better things out there.

Second, she noted encouragement she obtained from peers positive feedback.

Like my friends ‘cause I’m in a sorority and they, they say that when me and my ex were broke up that they noticed a change in my countenance and in my, they said in my face that I was, I was happier, and that you know I guess empowered me to keep going in the direction that I’m headed so.

Last, she described the role of education.

I feel, I’m not, I’m not done with school yet, but I am on the downhill and I, I feel so accomplished and I feel so privileged to have made it this far and so blessed, but happy in myself that I, I have you know made some you know wrong turns along the way but I have, I didn’t let the wrong turn become my path that I’m on, I got back onto the, to the correct

With regards to sources of empowerment in her life Lisa also described the role of attending college and education in her life.

I’m doing everything that I wanted for myself and I feel empowered because… I’m making a life for myself and I’m gonna make a better future for myself. So, I don’t know it’s just like when I’m doing these things…working, going to school, I just, I feel so good about myself because I feel like I’m accomplishing it, you know? And I’m not worthless…I do a lot, a lot more than a lot of people.

Like Tylea, Natalie recognized that being in a healthy relationship helped her feel
empowered. In addition to this having a job and being a supportive figure for her kids was noted.

I don’t have to lie or pretend to be something else you know. I don’t feel like I have to give all of myself to get something. You know it’s equal. We both give to each other and that’s—that’s a big thing. But I think knowing that I have somewhere that I can go if I have a hard time helps a lot.... I mean working you know...having a job that enjoy and take pride in myself - in you know getting my life back together, I guess you know being able to support my kids and be there for my kids and be involved in my kids life...volunteering at my son’s school.

In Hope’s case, she felt empowered by talking about the experience and at the same time being validated and receiving strength.

Well it’s, it’s helped me to release a lot of things. Um, and sometimes it doesn’t help I’ll admit, um it really depends on the person and the situation. Um, to have people recognize [pause] it helps me to—when I start talking about it and I realize other people’s reaction, it helps me remember that um “Yeah, it was abuse.”...It validates me and um, it also sometimes even if I talk about to myself about it, if I start talking out loud about um, what I went through and remembering something and if I start talking about it instead of just letting myself relive it cause there’s always this tiny little hope inside of you that you know—we were married and we were really in love, how come we can’t fix that you always—there’s always that tiny little flicker that says, “maybe I can fix it.” But talking about it helps me remember you know, “you’re not gonna fix him. You’re not change him.” Um, “that’s not good for you. That’s not who you are anymore.” So it helps that way too. To recognize that I’ve changed and um, I can say it’s still somewhat painful but it gets easier all the time and a lot of those things don’t um, don’t hurt as much. I don’t have as many nightmares. Still have them every once in a great while but not as often.

Hayley noted school among other things in the following.

To answer your question about like empowering things…. I learned survival, like none other. I was living in [another country]...starving to death, and every day I had to wake up and figure out how I was going to feed myself. When I came back to the US I had $5 and one backpack worth of stuff, and everything you see in this house today is mine. I earned it. I earned my degree, graduating from college was huge, like huge and empowering, because I walked away from my school in the middle of the semester and into this mess. That was majorly empowering, was school…. So, that’s another skill, so that’s another thing like you asked, what empowers me, just my ability to entertain, like take the pain and kind of, kind of
entertain with it. So, those are some of the big ones. Just feel like I have skill, I feel like I have an education, I can complete something. Because before I had been a high school dropout, I felt like I was always a quitter. So finishing college I was like, “I’m not a quitter, I can put my mind to something and follow through.

Lina found that she was empowered by the act of leaving the relationship.

Oh, leaving. ‘Cause I never thought I could do that. I never thought I would ever leave him. You Know? I never thought I could be this happy in my life. I never thought any of this would be possible you know when I look back and-and when I—when I’ve um, the last time—the last shelter that I went to and the lady was taking my intake and she told me one thing that, really rang true, she’s like, “He’s like your drug” cause you know when you’re on drugs she’s like, “He’s your drugs you know that right?” “Cause you can’t do without him.” Oh, my gosh that was like ah, that really like a head, hit, the nail hit and I was like, oh my gosh you’re right.” Because you know like when a lot of people on drugs they can’t really do without them. And that’s, I think that’s why a lot of women, that’s there drug and they think they can’t do without the abuser because he makes you think that you do without him. But I just want to tell women, “Yes—yes you can!” Cause we’re strong…and that’s why they…try to take all your strength from you but you can always get that back. It took me 18 years but I’m here and I am happy, I’m peaceful, I got my son back. I got my place back. Oh, my gosh; I cannot trade this for anything. No. Not at all.

Christina felt empowered by the support group, learning to protect herself, and being an example for other women via work through the coalition against DV:

I mean the support group I love, because it’s like I can in there and you know I’d say I feel like I’m really on my road to healing…. I feel like I can go in there and help be an example for other women. You know? So that’s really empowering. I’m starting volunteer work with the coalition and so I’m taking like a speaker’s training and things like that. so, that’s empowering. Um, I’m taking a self-defense class right now, that’s really empowering; like awesome. Um, so yeah, there’s a lot of things just, just the fact-looking back that I got through it. You know? It’s like, amazing.

Similarly, Alice noted active involvement with the coalition and speaking out about DV helps her feel empowered.

I all the time you know, the coalition has a speakers bureau and twice a year those trainings…and I take bunches of them to the groups cause I also, I go to-to the area agency group that’s it’s geared towards women that are 50 and over and I
take it to them and I cannot stop telling them, how empowering it is to stand and tell your story to people. People listen to you. And people learn from you and people know from you, they learn what is domestic violence. I was a sergeant in the Army. I was a rich woman. I was wealthy, we were very rich, not from my home, but from what we worked and still I was sitting there for 37 years of marriage for so many barriers.

For Carolyn, her faith, children, and providing information about DV were described as sources of empowerment.

Well like I say my faith, all, all every day. And my children, and my family, you know. My um I had 6 brothers and 4 sisters and so a couple of my brothers work in this too, they help also. So it’s like, it’s real fulfilling because I’m getting not only my little family but my siblings and some of their friends, I’m getting people involved in wanting to do this you know, ‘cause I’m like PSA’s are one of the, to me, one of the fastest and easiest ways to get information out there right now because of the internet, you know. So we do them and we put them up there.

In addition to sharing her story, keeping away from her abuser makes Natasha feel empowered.

Not answering him....it only makes me feel stronger when he calls or when he tries to contact me and I want nothing to do with him. It just gives me this, “I’m in control,” this, “you can’t take this away from me.

Additionally her children were also described as a source of empowerment and she stated, “Just, my kids and that’s it. I mean...my kids, 100% my kids, 100%.” Selina noted that one of the “most empowering things” she did also happened after she was out of the abusive relationship. She recalled:

It was a relationship that I was in um for most of 2012 and it was fine, it was um we were...on paper just a really great match. Um no nothing at all, absolutely nothing abusive or manipulative or controlling, unhealthy in any way um but we just weren’t connecting and if I had been you know even myself from a couple of years ago I would have thought, “Well this is not bad, he’s not a bad guy so I’m just gonna stick it out and try to make it work,” um and I just I was like, “No, I’m not happy, I’m not fulfilled I don’t need to be in a relationship. If I never find a relationship that I want, I’m okay with that, I don’t need to stick with this relationship that isn’t working. It’s a great relationship it’s just not fulfilling.”
And so I broke it off and it was really hard for me for about a month and then once I got through that um I just, I’m the happiest I have ever been in my life- just knowing that I can leave even a good thing behind, if it’s not right for me um and not have that “let’s try to make it work” um mentality, you know if it’s not working, it’s not working and move on.

**Making meaning.** As the survivors told their stories there was a strong sense from many of them that there was purpose to their life experience. Many have struggled to make meaning of the traumatic events they survived, and all in one way or another feel a strong commitment to “pay it forward” and help others in similar situations. Making meaning also entailed learning from their experiences and sharing that knowledge with others. As Christina noted of her experience in putting her life back together, “You know it’s empowering though to put your time towards that and give back...” Similarly, Hope stated:

> I think it helps you recognize that there is a reason you went through it. I mean I-I look at myself and I think, “You know if God chose me to go through this, there’s gotta be a reason.” And so what’s that, you know, what element of that can I use? and it just kind of helps you recognize that—you know to—to feel that I’ve learned from my situation and there’s a reason that I have the strength to get through it and perhaps it’s to help others who maybe don’t have the strength or don’t have the ability to see and um, it—it just helps you-you know it’s a little part of the healing process.

Selina had a similar experience and said, “That night—the next night within the first couple of nights after I was assaulted I—I had that realization that...this happened to me so that I could help it keep it from happening to other people.”

**Sharing my story.** Another clear example of making meaning and giving back was women’s willingness to participate in this study. Almost all indicated that if their participation would help others, they were willing to take time to share their story. All expressed hope that their stories would contribute and make a difference. Alice noted,
“Yeah. I’m glad I had a chance to talk to you cause I never, I never talk about it anymore.”

Methods of helping and making meaning have taken many other forms as well. For example, Christina shared:

I’ve really made an effort to go outside of my comfort zone; I actually um, shared my story on-line and it-it kinda went viral which was really cool cause I wasn’t sure how people would respond and, like you said, people can be very judgmental. People can say, “well, what was your role in this?” Or “yeah he acted this way, but what did you do?” or “why didn’t you just leave at that point?” or why- you know so just never quite know and so that was kinda my first step and I was really glad I did it. And um, then I took a speaker’s bureau training through the coalition so I’m hoping to –to start to do some of that just because there’s so many stereotypes out there. I mean people think, “oh domestic violence happens to...this specific group of people and they are un-educated and they’re this race and they’re this…” whatever, and it can be further from the truth so that’s something that I really wanna try to dispel all those myths and things that aren’t true.

Hope told her story by writing a short story of her experience; she also noted planning to help women who were in similar situations as herself

It’s very cathartic to write about it as well. I’ve written um, you know several pieces that have helped me. Like when I think about that my story is right here in this book and this book is published and anybody can read it. [she mentioned in the beginning that she hoped her writing would help others understand ] I realize okay, it not...buried in here in anymore [gesturing to inside of herself] and it’s out there and it’s the truth and um, I don’t have to carry it all by myself...so in that way it’s very cathartic.

Carolyn shared her story via blogs and online videos; she provides online sources and is in the process of writing a book.

I had already started writing my book, which I’m in the process of. I’ve got a third of it to finish editing and then I’ll be done with it. But uh so my son and I decided to take chapters out of my book and start videotaping it...it’s been a real journey, but I feel like I had a lot of pain when I was young with this man, but I feel it was all worth it because of what I’m doing now in working with other women, and when I go out and speak I show videos and people thank me and,
“You helped me,” or you know, “Can I talk to you?” “Can I call you?” that is so fulfilling you know so I’m really quite thankful that all this happened because there was a reason behind it.

Lina shared her story and helped others via mentoring immigrant women.

I’m mentoring this lady, and some of them they’re like why, they don’t see anything wrong with them beating their wives. And “how dare you leave?” So, I think they should make it just a little bit easier. I’ve been there before so I can help someone. You know like if they can leave or um, or if they just left and they still sad or vulnerable, I could tell them...“look at me, I’ve made it out and I’m happy and you could be happy too.” So yeah, I love mentoring people you know whenever I can, just helping one woman—one by one—and that I can help, it’s huge for me it makes me happy. I have a lady that I mentor and ah, she’s doing great I mean she...where is she from, I think she’s from West Africa and she’s in her 60’s and she’s you know she’s trying to start all over again. It’s you know-so she’s doing great, she got a job, she’s got her own apartment, you know. So just being there for her and telling her it’s okay. You know and “you left him and it’s hard and but it’s going to be okay.”

Making sense and meaning of their experiences also helped these survivors in their own healing processes. While it was evident that the telling of their stories to a complete stranger was difficult for some survivors, many indicated that it was helpful to talk about what they went through and was a way for them to “get it out.” Several women cried while discussing their stories and this researcher was also moved by their stories of survival in the midst of horrible circumstances.

Another aspect of “paying it forward” included teaching others what they’ve learned about DV and providing suggestions for improving how the system and interventionists deal with those who experienced or currently experience abuse. Below demonstrates that part of making meaning for these survivors was learning from their experiences.

In some way I can really justify it, you know?...like just bad parts in my past, like it’s a part of my past but it helped me become who I am today…I’m not happy
those things happened, but I’m happy that I was able to learn and get over it, you know?...I really struggled with my decision until I went through counseling and I talked about all my regrets for leaving, like I still regretted leaving, because I felt like I just left him high and dry, and he’s gonna be worse off for me leaving. Like it just really sat on my conscience, and I had to talk about it for like a month straight to realize that I just can’t help him, he has to help himself. (Lisa)

I knew that um, I wanted to be stronger and I wanted to change my-I wanted to learn from it. That um, and I wanted to know what my side of it was. Um, and I’ve had to do that all that on my own. (Hope)

If I’m, if my, if what I’ve been through can change the fate of one person you know, maybe, it would be at least worthwhile you know. It wouldn’t be such a waste. (Anne Marie)

I’ve definitely learned a lot of how to deal with things in a better way than using and numbing and you know reaching out to others and also being of service to other people you know? Like that’s why I decided to do this because in a way it’s getting out of me and I think if I get it out I can, I don’t know. Sharing your story...helps and maybe like one of the speakers in NA she said, “You know if only person hears my story and says ‘hey I’ve been there’ and I help that one person.” That’s kind of me, I think hearing somebody else say...it helps you not feel like such a failure like...you weren’t the only one and you’re not the only who’s made mistakes, made that mistake. I’ve seen a lot of in like NA that you know like they share a story and you’re like, “oh, that was me.” And like, and for some reason it makes you not feel so bad to know that somebody else been stupid or somebody else has been miserable...somebody else has done the same thing that you’ve done. And then again they’ve come out of it. (Natalie)

This experience has been a strength for me. Up until 6 months ago I would have, if I could have gone back and, and got, and just erased those 2 years, I would have done it. But now, I wouldn’t give them up, because they’ve made me who I am…: I realized that I, well, you can, you can have, you can take any situation and focus on the bad or you can focus on the good, or both. And for so long when that happened, and for so long afterwards I was so caught up in what had happened, that I was miserable and, and I was still a prisoner. And the only thing that kept me alive for many, for many years after I left him was knowing that if I died, that he won. And um it, in the past year, especially in the past 6 months, that’s finally started to change. And I realize now that I gained so much more than I lost, like, I don’t even know who to put it into words, other than I can look at something and make the best of it or I can look at something and make the worst of it, and knowing how much I hurt, and knowing how much these little, tiny things that people did, unknowingly helped me, that’s who I want to be, and that’s what I want to put out. (Hayley)
I had to learn—my gut is always right. Um and the times that I have listened, that I have ignored it or tried to rationalize something um you know like, like with the abusive ex and then other unhealthy relationships, my gut tells me right away “This is not going to be good for you,” “Oh but he’s so smart. Oh but he’s so cute. Oh but he wants to spend so much time with me and I love the attention—” Oh but this, oh but that um every single time it’s ended badly um maybe not as badly as you now him being arrested for assaulting me but it’s just ended badly. And so I absolutely had to learn to trust my gut…I’m really observant. Um and it’s not like I can always pick off like, like rattle off like here’s the thing that this person did that set me off that, that makes me suspicious but it, I call it like my intuitive memory like I’ve just I’m so, it’s not really conscious, it’s so subconscious ‘cause I’ve gotten so used to it and I don’t like to think about it like so I can just, and like I’ll just know it’s like, “I don’t like that person, I can’t tell you why, but I don’t like that person,” and if I ignore my gut and I continue on with the relationship with that person in any form, then I find out why, so I just kind of have given up on trying to figure out why and just believe my gut. (Selina)

I feel very fortunate because a lot of people in the situation that I came from, a lot, there’s a lot of people still out there that don’t ever, don’t either ever get out of it or they don’t, or it takes them a lot longer to get out of it than me, like the drug use and stuff like that, but along with the drug use comes a lot of abusive relationships, you know? I feel very fortunate at the same time to get a second chance to even accomplish something, because before I got sober I hadn’t accomplished anything, well I had accomplished my GED because I had gotten some periods of sobriety, a couple college credits, but I did have any, I never worked, I never, I never earned anything, I didn’t have, I didn’t own anything, my kids never lived with me, I never had a job, I never, you know, I didn’t have anything to show for my life. Now I have a chance to get things to show for my life. I can say you know, “I actually did something meaningful with my life,”...that’s exactly why I would like to do this, come here and do this, and I did it once before because I feel it’s very valuable um if there’s, if I could support anybody that was in a domestic violence relationship and help them to get out of it, I would do that, because it, it’s, it’s horrible- the feelings you go through, nobody understands, everybody’s just like “Why can’t you just leave? I don’t understand why you just don’t leave. All you have to do is get up and walk out.” It’s not that easy, it doesn’t just happen like, it’s not, it’s not that simple. Nobody understands, everybody thinks it’s black and white, black and white, it’s not black and white—it’s all gray, it’s all gray. (Vanessa)

Recreating life. The experience of these women varied. Life after leaving the abuse had both positive and negative elements. Many described a feeling of happiness, control of their own lives, peace, and other positive outcomes. For example, Selina
shared her description of life after leaving, “Amazing! I, I remember thinking, “Oh I’m so happy now, oh I’m so happy now. I have everything I need.” At the same time, some women described not being prepared for continued emotional distress. In addition to positive and negative elements, for many, life after leaving abuse included being able to give back, improving their lives, or re-inventing their sense of self from victim to survivor. Lisa described the following.

So I had to go through and reinvent my whole life, pretty much, because I had centered my life around him, like he was in every aspect of my life.... So I had to completely rewire my life so that I would have social connections in other places other than him, because I just relied on him being there.

Prior to our interview, Hope asked me to read a short piece about her abuse that had been published in a book. What was written on the pages was not simply a painful story of the horrible sexual abuse that her husband submitted her to, but the story of a woman who survived, escaped from a dark place in her life, and was trying to put her life back together again. This is what she had to say.

I feel stronger every day....Like I said, I think at the very least what I wanted to come out of it was um, to understand my side. What made me vulnerable…What um, allowed. What was it about me that allowed that to happen so that I could then make sure that it didn’t happen again and what kinds of things that I needed to do. Um, so I’ve learned a lot about myself as far as setting boundaries. Saying “no.” Um, allowing people in my life that respect boundaries, um, that doesn’t make me perfect, I mean I’ve been around people that um, you know I thought were okay people. It turned to-to have some of the same elements of, but I get-I recognize it a lot quicker and I get out....Part of it-you almost become hypersensitive to certain things…Um, and that’s probably kept me out of relationships to some degrees. If I see any little red flag, I go, no run. Um, it feels good every day to know that um, that I have the ability to take care of myself. That I start trusting myself that I can make healthy decisions

“I love it!” Tylea said of life after leaving.... “It really has helped me have less stress.... I have a lot more fun at school now, I really just feel lighter…. I don’t have the
heavy ‘what’s gonna happen when I go over there? What’s he gonna say?’ Am I gonna find him dead?...I don’t have that worry anymore.” Lina described a similar sense of relief.

If I turned I had to make a noise just to turn in my own bed. So yeah...when I think about it now, I mean like, oh, my gosh, you know? Now I’m like, gosh, just-just getting up, you know little stuff now I’m like, “oh, thank you God I can do this.” I go, I can come home whenever I want to come home...“Why, Lina?” That was my question...when in the shelter. I was like “Why didn’t you do this before?” I mean I had a top bunk, but I was like, “Yes, I have a top bunk but this is mine for now. I can turn around when I want to, I can read when I want.” Ah! It was wonderful. Just the peace..I treasure my peace now. You know? My son and I can joke around. I mean, I would laugh and he would be like “Why are you laughing?” So now I can really laugh. You know? I can really joke around if I want to. So those little things, I—gosh I would talk to—when I tell the women, look please, just those little things, just the peace-doing what you wanna do, you can’t—there’s nothing, there’s no money, no nothing-cause a lot of women being abused-ah, they’re rich a lot of them and you would never know....some of them will not leave because of the money but...no money amount can...get your self-worth back; your self-respect back, your—ah, just knowing that you matter, that is huge.

Christina described:

It’s amazing. Um, you know it’s like the house is so peaceful now. Like I don’t have to think about whose gonna come barging in and when. Like it’s just, you know me and my son. We have a great time. You notice things that you never noticed before. Just simple things. Like we’ll just be sitting here reading a book or playing and I’ll just notice like...sounds weird but like you notice the peace...whereas before it’s like my mind was always spinning with, “what’s the next thing that’s gonna happen?” “How do I?” and I didn’t even realize that; how occupied I was. Until now, when I actually have that peace and that space...it’s just so refreshing that I can, I don’t have anything to hide anymore. It’s like this is my life, this is me, this is my story—that’s it.

Similarly Carolyn noted of her life now.

It’s wonderful. Yeah, I mean, I don’t have any restrictions on where I can go, how I can go, when I can go, you know, or when I’m coming back, I mean no restrictions. Um my children see me today and express tome how proud they are of me and that’s the best feeling in the world you know. I mean they’re all grown, all 7 of my sons are 6 feet and over you know but they come and they pick me up
and give me a big hug and “I’m proud of you mom” and you know, and that pride that I receive from my children is like, the ultimate you know, because I know it could have turned out different; it could have been a whole new story that was very sad and very, you know. So I do um I’m very, I’m not, I don’t want to say I’m extra cautious, but I am cautious, you know, when I meet somebody and things like that and now I know I can investigate you, you know. I can look you up, I can investigate you, I can find out what I want to find out. A long time before I even decide whether I want to see you or not, you know. So that’s, that’s a good feeling.

Giving back. As noted previously, part of making meaning of their abusive experiences included sharing their stories in hopes that it would help others and learning from their experience. Likewise, giving back was noted to be important for women not just because it helped them personally, but also because they could help others. For these reasons many noted that after leaving the abuse, it was important to give back. Alice co-facilitated a support group at a local agency and she was also a on the speaker’s bureau, “So I went around and told my story to bring awareness you know, to the community about domestic violence.” Similarly Natalie stated, “I think being of service...I think that helps a lot...I try to help with NA a lot cause I think giving back to other people and helping others-like it does[help]cause you get out of yourself you know.” Hope had a goal to help women who like herself had experienced the type of sexual abuse she had gone through.

Hopefully, one of my goals is, like I told you, I know that there are other women out there and I can sometimes recognize—there are people that I know from my past that, I know are in controlling [relationships] And I know that there are other women who are probably pushed into...that side of life that they don’t really want to be a part of.... When I was looking for help, if you look for help for sexual abuse you’d end up dealing with people who were sexually abused as children, sexually abused by strangers, date rape, um, different things, but it’s very rare that um, people talk about it from spouses. Um, and I haven’t really found that community of people and I would like for other women to know that...it does exist and you don’t have to be ashamed…and you can get through it.
Carolyn further discussed how she gives back via her Facebook page.

I have a little Facebook page...where I post “If you need to get away call these” the hotline for abuse or the national hotline...I try to put references in there as well as nationwide references,...I go on the internet and investigate information and then I bring that information into my page on Facebook. You know, trying to give to people, and people will call me or send me messages you know,...“I’m so happy that you put that one on about rape because I was raped,”...and they tell me you know, one of the girls was like,...“when you put that up I bawled ’cause I never told anybody I got raped,” she said, “but now I feel like I can talk about it,” and I was like, “Good for you.” And so I started posting stuff for her you know, so it works out, it’s fulfilling and it works out well because other people, if people tell you that they’re getting...some kinda comfort or some kinda uh helpful information form you then that’s an A+.

Hayley shared that for her, doing “small acts of kindness” and helping others as she was help was important.

And so it’s like those little things that people do, like, I’ve now realized, I can do that, and be that person, that positive person in other people’s lives, because you never have a clue what other people are going through. And just doing those small things, those small acts of kindness...like I say right now, now my goal is any situation, to take the good from it and throw away the bad....And allowing myself to be the person, the people that helped save me, help me save myself- even though they didn’t know it. Just by doing those little things, like a smile can change somebody’s life, and that’s what I’ve learned.

In Natasha’s situation, being open to talk about her experience and helping her clients was another way she gave back.

And to be 100% honest with anyone. I’m honest with anyone who asks me about it because I feel like I have nothing to be ashamed of. I’m not ashamed of it. Because I think, more women than we know go through it and lie about it and hide it and feel ashamed for it and wanna fix it, or feel that it’s their fault and, and I guess that’s another support system. My clients. I have free psychology because we get to talk to each other and more people than you know have gone through it and so when they tell you their experience and you’re able to tell them I’m able to tell my experience to a lot of people and a lot of people tell me their experience. So it’s really nice to have that confirmation that I’m not the only one, I’m not stupid, I’m not horrible because I let that happen to me.

**Healing.** It was clear the women were at different stages of healing. Women
who’d been out of the relationship longer appeared to be at a place in their lives in which they did not experience the same intensity of distressing emotions compared to those who were more recently out of the relationships. For example when speaking with Anne Marie, who’d been out of her relationship the least amount of time, it was evident in her affect and demeanor that it was emotionally difficult to have to recount the details of her experience. Those who had been out longer, like Alice, did not appear as emotionally distressed in affect and demeanor and were able to speak of the abuse as a part of the past. Whatever the level of current emotional distress, all of the women noted healing was part of their life after leaving the relationship.

Carolyn nicely described the role of healing and what she tells other women.

I tell other women when they say, “How’d you do it?” and I tell them I say “What you have to do is talk about it or write about it or read about it or sing about it or,” I say, “You gotta do something to get it out.” I say, “Because as long as you leave it in it festers and it grows…but you start healing when you get rid of it, you let it go.... Whatever you decide,” I say, “It’s a process of getting it out.”

Lina noted part of healing for her was getting her self-respect back and she did that through the following.

Listening to other women. I was like, “I don’t have to live like that.”...I’ve had like self-taught, with the help of God and I’ve always, I would listen to other older women. You know? I haves much respect for older peoples and so I would listen to them and see what they say.

Christina shared her process of healing:

It was hard though, going to the support group at first. I mean it was really, really hard - it’s like, you know a wound where it-it had kind of closed up and I—I knew that I wasn’t healed. I’m like I’ve gotta do the hard work and it’s like you re-open it every time you go in there. But I mean it’s like talking to you right now—you know it’s hard but—every time I talk about it. Every time I go back there it makes me realize I’m never doing that again. So, it’s just healing in a way, but also hard I guess.
Hayley noted that recalling her therapist’s words helped her in the healing process.

She said something to me that meant a lot, and she said, “Things always have a way of working themselves out.” And so I would just, every time I felt like there was no way I’m ever gonna get out of this, I would remember what she said and just remember things always have a way of working themselves out, and they did.... It’s hard because it’s trying to, you gotta remember this happened when I was like in those ‘formulative’ years where you go from being a minor and where your parents make your decisions, to an adult. This happened, when I was 18, just almost 19, and I left him when I was 21. So it’s that exact age. So that affected me in terms of me understanding what a healthy relationship is. What assertiveness is, versus aggressiveness. So sometimes I wonder, am I being assertive or am I being aggressive So that’s, that’s the hard thing. Well, about being someone who’s been in an abusive situation and lived through that and then being somebody who no longer has that in their life, understanding what a healthy relationship is. Understanding what boundaries are acceptable and what are not. Understanding what rights I have as a human being and what things I don’t have a right to do. This is all still, that’s the hard part of it.

Healing also involved making choices for themselves and taking charge of their lives, as in Natasha’s case.

That’s something that my mom tried to put me through was, that “You’re horrible, that you let yourself do that, I’m gonna take the kids from you I’m gonna do this.” And I told myself then, that I need to remove you from my life. And I did. I removed her from life until she was ready to be supportive because, I needed her, I knew she wasn’t right. I knew that, I wasn’t the only person who made that kind of mistake and I knew I couldn’t fix it, but I knew that I could continue my life in a better way for my kids and that no one was gonna take my kids. So that in itself pushed me even further to just be strong I guess.

For Selina healing consisted of recognizing triggers and being self-aware.

I have a sixth sense now. I still have the triggers, but I have the self-awareness to know when I’m being triggered. Um I remember a few years ago um meeting this guy, he was a friend of a guy that I was dating, and just thinking, “Oh, Selina from 5 years ago would have been all over you.” And um just knowing that leads down a bad road, it’s just I have, it’s just this sixth sense...and part of it, comes from being in abusive relationships and learning about how they work and seeing the signs and the methods that abusers use to manipulate the victims, but it also came a lot from being a flight attendant, you know you meet up to you know 500 people a day, and I just got real good at the like snap judgments. Like even you know something as trivial as like “That guy’s gonna order three drinks and think
that I’m gonna serve them all to him on a 45-minute flight, when I would barely have time to serve one,” like but I just can size somebody up just within you know 30 seconds, so I know when to stay away and when to engage you know a relationship — you know even just a friendship.

Vanessa took time to focus on herself in order to stay sober and heal.

Well the first part of it I think was more of staying out of relationships and just working on myself…I went through a trauma therapy group and it was like a yearlong, and that was all about working on myself and all of the stuff that I’ve gone through in my life and you know, I did not, I was not in any relationships the whole time I was in there, that how I wanted it, that’s how my therapist wanted it.

Similar to what Carolyn stated, talking was a way for Alice to heal.

It helps a lot when you talk about it. So for few years I was talking all over the place. I even spoke to perpetrators… they have the, the program where you know abusers on probation, part of the program was to come and listen to a panel of us and that was an experience.

Unanticipated challenges after leaving. Many of the women disclosed that they wished they would have known of the continued trauma they would experience after leaving. Many described the unspoken issues they encountered, such as adjusting to an abuse free life, continued fear, and PTSD. Several noted having nightmares, severe anxiety, and depression, for which they felt unprepared. Even after being out of the relationship, Alice acknowledged a continuing, lingering fear of her ex-husband.

I’m not afraid of strangers here, but with him, yeah, you never know. I’m more quiet now, but still it’s never a 100% for sure because in his mind, I left him. I broke his family. I took his children; they had to take an order of protection against him, because he would go to their work after I removed them from the situation. He knew where they work, he would come, he would harass them and so, in his mind, it’s all my fault and his mind I am not allowing them to talk to him... They just don’t want to talk to him because they’re afraid of him. Not because they hate him. He thinks he’s in a punishment because they hate him and soon the punishment is going to be over. He doesn’t understand that they’re afraid to have him in their lives... I feel safe, fairly safe, I don’t look over my shoulders anymore, but I know that I’m not 100% safe. I keep an awareness…. I keep an awareness, I always look at my surroundings. He came back one time, he was
harassing my daughter at work and stuff, he came for a few days and when I knew
he was here I had to close this curtain [points to curtain] because from the
building across you can see my kitchen. I was afraid he was gonna stand there—
it’s like a stalker and there is security in this complex. I told the security guard
when I came, my group finishes you know at night...by the time I come here
it’s...dark; I told the security guard to please just stand downstairs and watch me
you know, going in safely. I was looking over my shoulders, so I know he’s not
here, because he left a message…to my daughter last week.... So basically, I’m
99% feeling safe, but if I hear that he’s coming then, it shakes me, brings me back
all the way and I’m really, really scared...yeah, I have a big mouth, “I’m not
afraid, well let him come!” you know now I’m gonna show him, this and that, but
believe me when I hear that he’s around, I’m shaking in my boots.

Christina also described the continued fear she experiences.

There’s still that fear in the back of my mind when we do the exchanges of my
son. I don’t trust him. I mean, you know, so there’s still a certain angst that I
have…when I’m here by myself at night. It’s kind of like, you know...he lived in
this house for ten years before I bought it. So it’s like he knows this house very
well. Is he gonna try to break in, is he...you know, and you just have flash backs
of stuff that happened here...I don’t even like to sleep in my room because it’s like
the closet’s there and that’s where that whole thing happened.

Selina spoke of the depression she experienced.

then I got out of it and I went through some pretty serious depressions and I
would go - kind of go in and out of them um, but it really took me finally, and I
still was you know, drawn to those personalities and I still have those triggers and
even if they’re not intentionally abusive, manipulative, or controlling like those,
there are still some people that can make me really unhappy because...it’s so hard
to explain because it’s so subtle, but as soon as I got those relationships out of my
life um, where I wasn’t being respected um you know in work, um living
situations, friends, um boyfriends, um I just got so much energy back. I wasn’t
spending so much emotional energy to shore myself up against these people.

Hope spoke of her lack of preparedness for the continued trauma she would face.

I think at the time you just, you act on, whatever...instinct you have just to get out
just to survive. What I wasn’t prepared for was, ah, all the trauma that you go
through afterwards. After being a survivor, and sometimes I think, you know, if
um, women talk about that side that it would keep other women where they are,
because it’s tough. Um, and I’ve dealt with it all on my own. I had to get...I
sought out therapists. I knew that I was dealing with depression. I was having
flash backs that interrupted my work, that interrupted my driving. Um,
nightmares…and I knew that I didn’t want to live like that, but I knew I had to get help. And it took me a long time to find anybody who was um, well equipped to um, to help me through it. You know afterwards in going through the trauma and the things that you deal with later; those were the things that were you. I kind of felt more of a victim—you know having to deal with the nightmares and the flashbacks and the other crap that you don’t know that you’re gonna have to deal with…That’s where I kinda felt like I was a “victim” if you wanna use that term and then you know struggling to get through that—that’s where I just kind of I felt more alone.

Similarly, Anne Marie speaks of the PTSD she has tried to overcome.

I tried to overcome the best way I can. And sometimes I get high, sometimes I don’t. Most time I’m not now [using] I mean it’s better. I had nightmares. Horrible nightmares. Always had’em but they’re worse, they were worse really bad. I have really serious PTSD right now…I can’t come out of the room.

As with Anne Marie, Hayley’s PTSD makes it difficult for her to leave her home.

It’s to the point right now, even today I have a hard time leaving my house, even though this has been over for almost, well it’s 2007, so 6 years. I still have trouble leaving my house…Um my therapist diagnosed me as having PTSD so some of these things I have kind of like a blank, or I’ve forgotten something.

Natalie noticed that she has had a difficult time adjusting in her current relationship.

Well first it was hard. I mean-honestly it’s hard ‘cause you’re so used to a certain way and you know and I found myself apologizing for everything and my boyfriend would be like, “why are you apologizing?”…. Like or he’ll tell me nice things, I still have a hard time hearing it. Sometimes I don’t believe it, but it’s been-it’s—it’s a lot different you know to be-to not be scared and not - or to have somebody that really cares about your well-being, that notices when I’m having a hard day or you know instead of, like when I was in that relationship it was all about him, “Oh, what’s wrong how can I help you.” It’s –it’s different to be in a relationship where I-both people care and notice each other you know? ‘Cause a lot of it I feel, when I was there it was all about him and what I could do to make him better and help him and it wasn’t about me. So it’s- nice to be in a relationship where I can see both of us. We help each other.

From victim to survivor. Although women described earlier that they had begun to develop or notice discrepancies in their identity, for many it was not until after they were out of the relationship that they were able to begin to view themselves as survivors.
Similar to the process of leaving, women described that the inner shift that took place was a process that took time and healing. Lina noted it took months for her to see herself differently.

A couple of months...because even when I left, I was in a shelter. I was still kinda like, you know like that transition...I didn’t know myself, then after a while you know, when I left the shelter I was like “Okay I can do this.” I can actually go, like actually leave work and go to the store by myself and it’s okay. Or I can be late coming from work and I don’t have to call and say “hey I’m running late.” Or because I mean, if I was like a couple minutes late he wanted to know why I was late or if I was with somebody else. So just being able to go home or going home late I don’t have to tell to anybody okay, “I’m not gonna be late” so little stuff like that, when I finally left I can do all that stuff, like, “Hm” I’m finally free I can actually do this stuff by myself and it’s okay. But it took like a while ‘cause I was still in that you know, like I couldn’t believe I had left him...So you finally get to say “Hey, I can think for myself.” That’s when you’re like, that’s like the Aha moment everybody talks about. Like, Wow! I mean it seems so simple to some people, but just that it is like huge.

Hope described her process.

Maybe you don’t even you know to take the word survivor and say okay, “Have I survived?”...When you start to discover that you have the ability to be who you want to be without anybody else having that um, impact on you that I have to please this person...I remember the first time that I um, recognized in myself—you know after I left—I enjoyed being around people you know I was never allowed to be around people-never be allowed to be part of the crowd or doing...but when I got—“Wow I really can be myself and enjoy this and I really like being around people.”

Selina described her experience.

The switch for me was almost immediate. Um, and it was kinda one of those fake it until you can make things though, like I-remember saying something “domestic violence victim” and my dad was like, “No, you’re a survivor. You’re a domestic violence survivor.” And I was like, “I don’t feel like it.” and he’s like, “You will.” So it was part of what the recovery for me was—was calling myself a survivor until I actually felt like it.

Christina talked about what it took to help her see herself differently.

But going to a support group was the number one thing that helped me. Um
because when I actually left the state with my son and was forced back and I have no family here. Um very, very minimal support so there was a period of time where I’m like, I can’t do this. You know? and I’m sure my abuser thought, “Oh she’s gonna run right back to me.” And there’s times that I wanted to just because I had no support. Um, but starting to go to that support group is when I started to educate myself on exactly what it was that I went through cause nobody that I knew had ever been through this type of situation. People don’t talk about it—even if they have…. My friends wanted to help but it was like they didn’t really understand and then I go to this group and I’m surrounded by women where I don’t have to explain myself. Everyone gets it you know, and kinda like what you said, I eventually took the focus off of me like, “look what a stink I made…how did I let myself live like that?” and I turned it more on him. And it wouldn’t of mattered if it was me or any other girl it would have been the same outcome because it wasn’t me that made him do any of it and that the point for me where I’m like, “I’m not the one with the problem. I’m okay.”

Figures 3 and 4 represent an activity that took place during the focus groups in order to better understand how survivors’ identities shifted. The figures are compilations of the terms women used to describe their processes during the focus groups.

Figure 3. Shifting identities: Group 1.
This shift is noted as an active process in which survivors engaged in some behaviors that helped them reconfirm they were “okay” and not to blame for the abuse. By being behaviorally engaged, they realized that nothing is “wrong” with them. Tylea noted that after the breakup she felt she needed to be his friend but was soon able to realize who she was.

I still went over and you know tried to be nice and went over to his house but the abuse was still there and I finally got to the point where I could just walk out of the house and I didn’t care if he was screaming at me or coming after me. When I finally had the courage enough to actually drive away and not just stay there I felt that I was, you know getting myself back. I didn’t have to stay there...I was starting to really regain who I was again.

Lisa had the help of therapy and informal male role models as she describes below.

Therapy helped me a lot cause it helped me realize how bad of a situation it really was, by getting all out there cause like I didn’t realize really what I had gone through.... I got a lot of wake up calls where I looked back and was like, ‘what
was I doing?’ Family and friends were a big part of it and looking at the past and seeing how I was before him and then wondering how that changed and then re-defining myself after that…coming to school helped because I got out of my town, away from him…and I worked on stuff I wanted to do. Also meeting guys and seeing that they weren’t all like him helped a lot….

Being able to see the difference between other men and her ex-partner, helped make it clearer that the responsibility for the abuse within the relationship was on the abuser himself. As previously noted, many of the survivors blamed themselves, or were blamed for the abuse they experienced. Hayley provided an example of how reclaiming her life, aligning self with her values contributed to shifting identity.

I had kept this huge stack of letters from him…. I sat down and read his letters and I could see lies built into ‘em from the other side of it, and I sat down with somebody that I trusted and I was like going over lines where I could see how I had been…set up to fall for that trap and…this guy was a total racist. I was raised to be the exact opposite of that…when I look back…my old co-workers…I felt some of them really deserved an apology for me not standing up you know at times when he did the most ridiculous stuff…. I apologized and it felt like I reclaimed who I was versus who everybody thought I was…. Like it felt just so better and I felt like myself again, Like I was being true to myself.

Being able to see the relationship differently also helped them as their identities shifted, Lisa stated, “I didn’t see what kind of situation I was in until I was in counseling, I knew that it had affected me and had changed my life. I knew I was in a crappy situation but I didn’t realize how bad it was.” She continued, “It...just my mind was so numb then that it just seemed normal and seemed I had gone away a little bit….I didn’t see the difference so I went to counseling to try to separate and then I realized how dangerous my life had gotten.” Similarly, Natalie described that by engaging and speaking with others she was able to see the relationship differently, “You’re like, oh that’s not a normal relationship...What your boyfriend don’t do that to you?” Active
participating in therapy also helped in this process. Natalie noted, “My therapist too…she lets you get it out…you walk out of there and you’re like, ‘I feel a lot better.” Similarly Hayley stated:

I feel like I owe it to my therapist to say something about it…even though I can’t put a word on what she did...I call up this clinic and tell the woman on the phone what happened and she scheduled me right away to see this therapist and [she...just let me talk. She said, ‘Hayley you’re the kind of person that needs to see things from every angle so I just let you talk until you come to your own conclusion.”

**Norms and Practices of Community and Culture**

For some women, answers to the question about the role of community and culture in their relationship experiences naturally unfolded in their telling of stories. When prompted with this question, some indicated they didn’t recognize anything in particular and others were able to note specific cultural/community practices that may play a role in the abuse, or in leaving the abusive relationship. While some women described feeling “weak” and were submissive in the relationship, these stereotyped gender descriptions stemmed from the abuse they experienced, thus it is relevant to unpack gender stereotypes. Lisa talked of the “weak” woman stereotype that exists, “There’s such a stereotype like you have to be weak and you have to look for these abusers and it doesn’t happen to everyone, but I wasn’t weak before…he slowly broke me down, he tore me apart.” Natalie recognized the strength she once had was gone and she became submissive as a result of what she experienced in her relationship, saying, “I was very strong and nobody controlled me and nobody told me what to do at all before this relationship and within a matter of months it was , ‘yes, master, yes…” When
discussing women’s and men’s roles back in her home country, Lina noted there were still inequalities between men’s and women’s status in her community, “It’s changing a little bit.” She said, “but they still don’t…the women are still ‘down’ and the men are ‘up’…that’s probably why God said, ‘Lina, let me move you to America.’ Cause I probably would have been in trouble by now.” Alice, whose mother-in-law was not supportive and encouraged her to be quiet, noted the following about the views that were held by her ex-husband and his family, “His parents came from a country that is a man is dominant. The wife does what she’s told, sits home, and you know, bare foot and pregnant in the kitchen. It’s a different culture.” These views were unlike what she had been raised with as a child and young woman growing up. As previously noted in Natasha’s case, due to her partner’s complaints that she was attempting to be the “boss” in the relationship she tried to fit herself into the stereotypic role of wife, mother, and caretaker.

I’m pretty bossy and I’m really in charge of the house and I was used to being the “man” of the house, so making the decisions and doing everything so I was thinking, well he wants to be the man, I need to let him be the man…So I let him make more decisions. I…surrendered myself to him. I just thought if I’m, become this…you know, the “regular woman” I’m supposed to be, you know and he would say, “you, you need to cook more….” So I tried really hard to be that wife, that perfect wife that perfect mom, that perfect lover, everything.

The common feature of these culturally embedded messages about gender is power inequity, with men in a superior position.

I also was raised as a Southern Baptist which also teaches a very strict discipline and not that you know I blame this; I just recognize is that there were these things. My father…was given authority, given respect for certain and he was really good at letting me know he was the authority. And so it was really easy for me to fall into that um, into that submissive role. (Hope)
A few of the women also noted the role of obligatory commitment to their relationship. In Alice’s case, she described generational views that contributed to her strong sense of commitment.

I’m from a generation that you don’t just pick up and go…you, get married, you get married and you know it’s for life and we were raised like this. My generation was you know, you take it..., you don’t just leave tonight and today, but again even young women, when it’s an abuser and controller it’s very hard to leave them ‘cause they [abusers] don’t allow it. And even if they remarry and have other children, they’ll still harass you because they see us their property. “How dare, you leave them” you know?

Several of the women did not fit the stereotypical views of abused women, such as submissive, weak, and dependent. Lina, Natasha, Selina, Vanessa, Hayley, Hope, Christina, Lisa, and Alice held jobs and contributed financially and appeared to be the ones to hold the family together. As Vanessa noted, “I wasn’t dependent on him financially or anything else, you know? I was just dependent on myself.” Christina talked about the fact that her spouse was dependent on her financial income.

I look back now and I’m like “how did I even survive that?” Like how did I keep my job, you know, function on a daily basis um, you know and he was getting home at all hours of the night and I’m having to get up and work and…like I said he was unemployed for more than half of our relationship. He was in and out of jobs and he would get “laid” off apparently. I come to find out later that there was various reasons; so he’d lied to me about…the financial piece of it was just so stressful for me. You know? It’s like not only am—I supporting myself; I’m supporting another adult now and his son.

Similarly Alice shared:

I was the one who ran the business most of the time. He would show up at 2 o’clock in the afternoon, but in the mornings I would take my kids to school you know and I would go to work. So I, because of his laziness, I was lucky enough that I would do the book keeping and I would pay the checks and I knew every penny that we have. I was not ignorant financially and I was not abused financially.
Natasha, shared, “I was the one that survived the family, that pushed the family forward in everything; financial, emotional, everything it was me.” Additionally she noted:

He had lost his job and so he was really, really, angry and aggressive and mean to me ‘cause I was working and I was in charge of the money and so he was having to ask me for money, so he was getting meaner and meaner and meaner and um, then he, that’s when he started getting involved with illegal activity because he was trying to make money.

Lina spoke of the resentment her ex-husband felt towards her because she had a job.

As time went on and things start going not good for him...you know like no work, stuff like that. You know like the whole relationship, I always had a job and he would have a job and not have a job, so and some men can’t really take them not working so they...they start kinda like resenting you a little bit.

Tylea spoke of her money being stolen by her former partner.

He started stealing my money um he, he was in the [military] but he got a dishonorable discharge because he had tested positive too many times. Um after that money ran out that he was getting [the military], that’s when he started stealing my money.

Alice described the women from her culture and family.

I came from European culture where women are equal. Actually, my mother was the boss in the house and everybody listened to her and my father you know, held her like this [raises hand-palm facing up] my father was an angel.... that’s why I think this is from my childhood because I was strong from my childhood and probably you know, my mother was very, my mother was very strong. My sister is very strong. We are strong women. So I come from that kind of people, but um, sometimes I think if I wasn’t that strong, I might have been, break down you know earlier and somehow get away.

**Faith and Spirituality**

The following presents women’s references the role faith played while in the abusive relationship and in maintaining abuse free life. Although references to these can
be seen throughout these particular women’s stories, the following are quotes when specifically asked about the role of faith or spirituality. Carolyn described how faith helped her survive, “I think my faith, number one got me through, and I think the fact that I had so many children who depended on me that I, I felt that I had no choice you know?” Lina describes the important role faith played in her life.

Oh my gosh—it has to be God. I don’t know what I’ve would done. I don’t know what I would’ve done without Him, ’cause gosh some days I would be like “I can’t do this anymore.” I would never...do any kind of suicide, kill myself or anything like, but I would be like I can’t, I’m like this is not living. I used to be like, I can’t do this anymore. I cannot do this anymore, but I always found a way to do it. And there’s no one I can—it has to be God that helped me through all that. You know....So I just give it up to God ’cause I don’t know where I would be without him.

Alice recalled the following, “What helped me was first of all, time. I’m still alive, it’s nine years. Secondly, I believe the good lord is watching me and my daughters. Otherwise we wouldn’t have made it until now.” Hope shared the role of faith in her life.

Well certainly, um I was raised in church, Southern Baptist. I told you. And my faith, certainly gives me that strength because...I know that I’m precious to God so, and I know that um, this isn’t that kind of life style, even this kind of trauma that I’ve dealt with since, and this type of um, illness that you know it created, that was created by all that [abuse]. I know that that’s not what He thinks is best and I’m not gonna settle for it. I’ve always had that ability to say “I’m gonna do the absolute best I can do.” And give it the absolute best I can give it. Um, and this is not how I’m gonna live my life. This is-this is certainly not pleasing to Him. It’s not pleasing to me, this can’t be, there’s got to be a better um, so that’s given me a lot of strength.

Suggestions and Additions

Throughout both individual interviews and focus groups, women provided suggestions for those who work with or would like to help women in abusive situations.
Additionally, they shared their insights into what they found helpful and unhelpful and provided words of encouragement for those who are healing from abuse. The following represents these additions:

**The Helpful**

Christina once again noted how the police department and victim’s services was helpful stating, “The police department, their victim’s services coordinator that I got assigned and the whole experience with the prosecution there was just amazing.” She went on to further describe what made that experience helpful and how similar agencies may help women who were in her situation.

I had no pictures to prove anything, I didn’t have any other police call-you know-calls into the police um, but the prosecutor himself took time to sit there and listen to me, and to me that was huge you know because usually they say, “oh well, you don’t have it documented and if you don’t have pictures” and you know there’s a of case where someone only calls once and it’s that, and that time isn’t as serious as you know a lot of the other things that have happened which was my case and they were extremely responsive...and they took it very seriously....but just to be taken seriously for someone to hear me out and take me seriously and then act on it, and actually hold him somewhat accountable.

Similarly she spoke of police awareness and education to make it more likely that women would call them for protection and support.

I think if more police were aware of the dynamics in domestic violence and how they can help victims, I think that would make a huge difference for people. And just people knowing that they can call the police too. I mean, I really, really, really, even if I wasn’t going to leave the other times that he got violent. Like especially the time that he choked me, I wish like even the next day, I would’ve called the police and say “You know what, I couldn’t get to my phone yesterday, but this is what happened.” Or taken a picture of the bruises, but when you’re in it you always think well that’s you know, they always say that’s the last time it’s gonna happen

Talking about DV was important and survivors recognized it as not only helpful,
but as something that was needed. As Lina stated, “I mean people knew what was going on, but nobody wants to talk about it. Nobody wants to talk about - that’s why I’m like, ‘we have to talk about it.’” She went onto describe ways to make this issue more public.

I think that they should do like commercials, you know like how have commercials for drugs and stuff. I think they should do commercials for domestic violence on TV, maybe some people will...you’d be surprised who’s going through it and they think it’s normal and maybe if they see it on TV, ‘cause nobody wants to talk about it.

Christina shared a similar thought, “Unless people get out there and talk about it and make it less of a like, “ooh, don’t talk about it” we’ll assume it’s not happening. It’s never gonna go away. So that’s my, that’s what I’m pushing for.” “I think people need to be willing to talk about what’s going on more,” Similarly, Hayley stated, “because now that I’ve...been able to talk to some of these people, one of them.... he’s like, ‘I knew. I knew there was something going on, but I’ thinking I better not get involved.’ Hayley further shared:

And too many people are not willing to ask even. You know, the whole time there, two women mentioned it to me—that’s sad. So just like even the general public or mental health professionals when they encounter people like to be willing to ask about it, and not treat it like a disease or like a taboo topic.

Consistent with the suggestion to make DV a more public topic of discussion, Lina noted the need for more educational programs. For Lina, it was important to target the adolescent population.

We really have to educate, especially teenagers ‘cause you know, cause you’re like, “oh, hey” you know, “he’s paying me attention.”...but just one slap and then...the thing is that one slap if you let it go, it’s not gonna change. Just for him hitting you, the first time, he shouldn’t have hit you anyway, so that’s why we really have to educate women and teenagers that they’re not supposed to treat you and I was saying if he hits you once-he’s going to hit you again.
Therapy was helpful for a couple of the women. Selina noted the following.

Therapy, therapy, therapy; I try to get even like healthy friends like, “Go to therapy. You will feel so good about yourself,” there’s um a song by Dar Williams called Therapy and one of the lines is um, “I never felt so good about everybody else until I got to talk so much about myself.”...I’m the happiest I’ve ever been in my whole life, I would still love to go and just get more therapy, just ‘cause I know that there are gonna be other things that might come up...just buried childhood traumas that I haven’t processed yet or um learning new skills and in, you know and just dealing with stresses and um you know self-esteem, and therapy is such a big, big, big part of why I was able to recover.

Natalie had both positive and negative experiences in therapy. The importance of acceptance, a nonjudgmental relationship, and lack of therapist’s agenda was noted.

Not being judgmental. I know some therapists aren’t like mean to you but sometimes you say things and...make you feel like, ‘okay maybe that was the wrong thing I shouldn’t have said that.. having somebody you don’t feel judged by...just listens, is open minded...and when they do say something back they’re not saying it in a way that you feel like you should have done something differently,...they’re just willing to listen and...acknowledge what you’re saying but not really say, “maybe you could of done this’...just accepting…looking ahead instead of focusing on what I’d done and what I couldn’t change…she [therapist] never really focused too much on the past, I mean we talk about things ‘cause that lead to why I was there but it was more like, “okay now what are you going to do?”

The importance of honoring survivors’ time frames, respecting autonomy, and safety came through in their stories. Carolyn described the importance of safety during the leaving process.

I had a lady that came on Facebook and she was pleading that she didn’t know what to do. Now he was gone, but he would be home and she said, “Well should I leave or should I stay?” and all of a sudden it’s kinda like the board lit up and everybody’s like, “You need to go now, you need to go,” you know and so I wrote her and I told her, “You know the most dangerous time is when...you decide you’re leaving, that’s the most dangerous time in your life.” I say, “So whatever you do, get somebody you trust to help you, get somebody that you trust to, if you’re gonna make that move and you’re gonna leave, you find somebody to help you, because, I say, he will be angry…and so you gotta protect yourself, but you know I did it alone but I didn’t want to do it alone so I try to get them the
information that if you’re gonna do this, you need to get somebody that you trust to help you to get out, you know don’t try to just I’m gonna walk away. I say, “Because he’ll come and find you….”

Alice also emphasized the importance of safety and awareness that fear can be a barrier.

I just want to say, that at that time when I left him for good he found me. That’s another thing, that when your abuser can afford it and this didn’t cost him a lot; he went to another state and he went to [phone company] and he paid somebody $20...he told my daughters and they gave him my telephone bill, so now he knew where we lived. He knew my address…. I just left the motel and rented an apartment; he found me, knew where I lived, he knew they were lying to him…so now he knew that they were talking to me. My life and their life became really in danger and he found out where they lived and then I had to leave the place and now there is ARS-331318-the law that you can break the lease because of domestic violence, but at that time 9 years ago it wasn’t so I paid a big penalty in order to leave because I had the rent lease-I just leave there for 3 months. And I got an order of protection and you know, I had to move here, but he found me. So, so that’s a big barrier for women; they’re afraid, “what will he do if he finds me?” “What will he do to me or my kids if he finds me?”...more information, more awareness and mostly, more money for shelters, for counseling, for everything. Educating women, so they can get work because when I left I needed to work.

Hope highlighted the importance of giving the experience meaning and being of services to someone else.

I finally got to a place that’s like, “you know what, I’ve been through an awful lot and I’ve come out very strong afterwards and why” you know, “it has to have a purpose to some degree” so to give it a purpose I think is very helpful…and to give back and to help someone else. (Hope)

The Unhelpful

By sharing her experience with the court system, Selina shed light on importance of improving the system so that others did not have to go through what she went through.

I always say the years that I was drug through the court system for as twice as long as I was abused by him it was...far worse on me than the actual abuse was because it was not just him, it was the prosecutor, it was the judges, it was everybody all against me. Every single one of my victim’s rights was violated, um, when I tried to go to the victims’ rights ombudsmen they just addressed like
one of the ten issues that I brought up and they’re like, “oh, well we’re sorry, resubmit your complaint.” And I’m like, “I’m so over this.” He, the judge let it get continued, continued, continued for three years and...the prosecutor anytime his lawyer said, “okay, we’ll think about it if you reduce the offer.” Every single time she did and then finally I got to meet with her because the advocate didn’t step in and say, “no” to the prosecutor for me. I’m like, I need to meet with the prosecutor...so, the final plea was disorderly conduct with a weapon and the prosecutor came back and was like, no they don’t wanna take it unless it’s disorderly conduct. I’m like, “no” and they finally listened to me then. But it went from felony aggravated assault to misdemeanor disorderly conduct with a weapon. Nobody listened to me, nobody..., I’m so glad that the police officers handled it well, but once they were out of the picture once it got into the court system, cause I’ve heard, “oh, I called the police I have bruises and they didn’t arrest him.” You know I’ve heard so many stories like that. so I’m glad I didn’t have to go through that but once it got into the court system…I didn’t have the resources or the knowledge...sitting in court every month for 3 years I saw people get tougher sentences for carrying like an ounce of weed than he did for like victimizing me and brutalizing me

Both Lina and Hayley noted that their experiences in the shelter were a help in that they provided them with a place to stay. However, they were less than ideal. Lina suggested, “...My other thing is making the shelters more...comfortable and a lot of women just want a bed. I mean just to get away from it but for you to stay the whole [time] they should make them more accommodating....” Hayley provided the following input about what made her shelter experience unhelpful.

I’m talking about the women’s shelter, they were more focused on um following the rules...they’d come in, “You have 30 days to do this, and you need to meet these goals...and here’s when you need to be in the house.”...I’m sure like some of them have been abused, I’m sure, because a lot of people who were once victims of abuse want to help. But they’re coming with that more of that attitude; than the attitude of like empathy. And what you’re getting the empathy from is people like the one who had cancer, who’s not going back, you know?...and the thing is I understand that they need to have like, I mean they can’t have us be a free-for-all, but they’re so focused on, “Did you do your daily chore?” like, “Were you here by 10pm?”...They’re so focused on that. Now of course, you have to have some focus on that, but come on, like if I have just, like if I have to go get your signature to show that I washed the floor, like, that, that’s really not, that shouldn’t be focus. Of course those things need to get done but it just seemed like
there must be a better way to approach that….

Selina also discussed her experience with a lawyer.

Even I went to a family lawyer because he was trying to contest the order of protection…and she was like...“oh no you’re fine. Just tell your story and you don’t need my help.” And I’m like, I’m I felt like this small…and I’m like how am I gonna stand up to this. Like she didn’t make me feel small but I could have used somebody to not make me feel that small.

Awareness and Availability of Resources

In addition to what has already been noted, the women also identified a need for resources and more awareness of what resources are available to those in abusive relationships. As Hayley stated:

There’s a couple things that I would add, first off, I think um there’s...too much focus on “What kind of woman gets into this situation?”…too much focus on people talking about how you’re probably gonna go back. One thing that would have helped me a lot is knowing where else I could go other than a women’s shelter, like because a lot of times, there’s just not enough resources. Like I knew Walmart would let people sleep in their parking lot, so there was sometimes like I would go sleep in Walmart’s parking lot, so I didn’t have to be there. Like that, knowing what other organizations are willing to give you something that can help, would be like important. And um like just like the other women helped me way more than the counselors did. And when I came back here...actually I have the most awesome therapist, but the thing she never, all she ever did was just let me talk. I don’t know what her style of therapy is, but um other than she just let me talk

Hope felt it was important for the courts to have awareness of the power dynamics that occur within an abusive relationship.

One thing that really needs to be recognized too is that...like I said I ran from my ex-husband. Um, I wanted as fast a divorce as I could get, as far away from him as I could get. I didn’t want to have to face the issue ‘cause I knew there was a part of me that knew if there was any struggle; if there was any fight, if it got delayed at all, that I was still vulnerable to him. Even though I probably couldn’t have um articulated that at the time; or even necessarily recognize it but...I knew that he had that ability to manipulate my thinking. And I was so scared that if I
had to put up a fight that I wouldn’t, that I would end up going back. And I think that’s an element that the courts need to recognize too is that you’re putting the victim in a situation that they’re still being manipulated by this other person.

Lina discussed the importance of providing resources or having a program specifically for immigrant women.

There’s also a lot of women not from here. So, when they decide to leave, I mean-it’s like a taboo...and then if they go back..., then they’re like a scape goat ‘cause “How dare you leave your husband?” You know, he’s your husband, he’s supposed to beat you up. To them it’s normal.

A way to help women not tolerate the abuse.

Um, I think that you asked me how I stayed out of it, which was a really good question, and what finally got me to leave, but the fact is, so many women go back. And I went back about 5 times. Like I got out of it pretty soon into it, and every time I went back it got worse and worse. And it was finally to the point where I was afraid for my life and um I’m still considering staying, and I was afraid for my life. So I think that we need to figure out a way to keep us from going back, you know? But I think that’s the most important thing, because no matter what, people are going to get in these situations. Like there’s just people out there that are mentally abusive or, you know, there’s just those people out there and there’s people out there that will accept those people and take the abuse. And we need to figure out how to help the people not to take the abuse, you know? (Lisa)

Empathy, Understanding, You Are Not the Only One

Throughout their stories, the women wanted other victims to understand that they are not the only ones who are going through or have experienced DV.

I don’t know if there some way to help other women see, you’re not the only one who put up with this crap for so long. You know you’re not the only one who is degraded and did things just to keep this person happy. ‘Cause I know that’s how I felt...I let him do so many things to me and it was so embarrassing and it was so shameful it was like, I turned myself into this awful person and I didn’t want people to know that....you know in a lot of ways I felt like a prostitute because I would put up with what he did and I letting him use my body as a—physically for sex or just to beat me and stuff. And it was like, you know I’d look in the mirror
and I’d just feel like this piece of crap like this “nothing” and you know I mean it was so degrading and I just felt like I was nothing and I wish there was some way for other women to see that you’re not the only one whose done that…you’re not the only addict or alcoholic or…you know you’re not the only woman whose let a man do these things to you just to stay safe or just to...stay high or keep your kids safe. ‘Cause I know a lot of women do that…I know there’s women who’ve had to, who did because if he was hurting you he wasn’t hurting your kids…you know but then you feel like, I’m this bad person because I let him abuse me. You know, you do what you have to do to survive and it doesn’t make you a bad person I guess you know but it took me a long time to realize that I did what I did to get through it…that’s probably the big thing to reaching out to other girls like this, I don’t know how to get it out there but for them to know...you’re not the only one. (Natalie)

I think because you just said you know, “Tell your story from the beginning,” and it gives you a chance to really say how the story begins really, because it’s important to know the story just doesn’t begin with your last abusive relationship, it begins wherever the abuse began, which might begin in childhood, that’s where I learned, it’s a learned behavior, you learn to accept it when you’re either a child or when you become vulnerable as an adult and some man takes advantage of that, and you learn to accept it then and you go on from then, wherever you learn it is the beginning, you know? It’s important to know that it’s not as simple, like I said, it’s not as simple as: Why can’t they just get up and leave? There’s a door right there, why don’t they just get up and leave? It’s not that simple. It’s much more complicated than that, you know? And it’s like it feels like you’re like...there’s these attachments, and you feel obligated, guilty, you feel love, hate at the same. And, and feeling love and hate at the same time is such a difficult thing, it’s so, it’s so um, it’s devastating really because it’s like you’re very confused with yourself you question your own self. “Why, why would I love this person that hurt me so bad? I hate them, but why would I feel love for them still? I don’t understand that.” And then you start questioning yourself, it’s important that people that are going through this know that that’s a normal feeling to feel those feelings. It’s not strange and it’s not you and it’s not that something’s wrong with you, it’s not you- that’s a normal thing, it’s normal to feel that way. (Vanessa)

I remember part of my research doing some...reading some of the statutes of domestic violence in the different states and um and not just domestic violence but sexual abuse was actually where...most of my research was done and I found this statute in Florida that um has excellent language and it’s a-a statute against sexual abuse against children and it states….it uses language in there that recognizes the situation that actually is the most cases for sexual abuse or domestic abuse for any relationship and it’s the language that states that it’s an unequal partnership. And people assume that because we’re adults, because um, we’re in a marriage and that because we chose to marry this person that we’re in
an equal relationship and we’re not and I think that language needs to be a part of the statutes even in the adults’ abuse whether it be sexual or domestic violence or whatever and for that the courts to recognize and everyone to recognize that this situation that we’re in is not equal. They have somehow gained—the manipulation, the control—and taken the power away from us. They have created all the power and for them, to recognize that I think is is huge to see...to kind of change that mindset that, we’re victims and yes we make our own choices, so I think that they have trouble seeing adults as victims because they think, “okay we—you make your own choice to be in this situation and you should be able to identify the situation that you’re in and you should be able to identify what’s good for you and what’s not good for you.” And the reality is that, when you’re in those situations, um, you know if you take um, an adult whose abusing a child they’re taking advantage of that power that they have, that authority that they have—it’s the same thing in those types of marriages or those types of partnerships where someone has that ability;...they’re in a situation where they have to have control and...they have this ability over you to take your vulnerabilities to take your weaknesses and take advantage of it. And that’s um, you know something I think that, everyone, every human being has the ability to be vulnerable. Every human being has the ability to be taken advantage of by someone of this nature and just because you’re not in that situation or you don’t recognize that you have that ability within yourselves doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be able to identify with someone who has had that happen to them. And I think that’s where—it’s just that, disconnect where they’re not able to identify with it and if we could you know get them to identify I think that would be huge in helping them, you know—the system to overcome and to recognize that people are manipulated on a daily basis in all kinds of different situations and that’s what this is. (Hope)

Before you talked about like your focus was partially on wondering how women leave, and by far being in a women’s shelter-those women gave back to me more than anyone besides my therapist, my family, and stuff. I think it’s a huge resource that I wish like more communities would utilize teams of domestic violence “thrivers.” …You go from surviving to thriving....so it’s like life beyond that be able to give back and help because I don’t know that police or other people necessarily know how to talk to somebody. (Hayley)
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

DV is a phenomenon that impacts those in intimate relationships, their children, families, and society at large. The deleterious effects of DV are far reaching and are not limited by geography, gender, age, or SES (Band-Winterstein & Eisikovits, 2009; Koenig et al., 2003a; Morrison et al., 2006; Umberson et al., 1998). Children who witness and experience DV in the home are at greater risk for developing mental health issues, transmitting abuse to later generations or becoming an object of abuse as an adult (Foshee et al., 1999; NCADV, n.d.; Parks et al., 2011). Although there is greater awareness and progress has been made to address DV, the social and public health problems associated with this issue continue today (Black et al., 2011). The purpose of this current study was to gain insight into women’s lived experiences of DV from the view point of survivors themselves. In doing so, my hope as a researcher was to shed light into the realities that women in these situations encounter in order to better understand their sources of strength and resilience as they survived within the context of their abusive relationships and eventually made their way out of the relationships. Additionally, the hope was to contribute to the literature by adding more information of the mechanisms that assisted these women in leaving their abusive relationships and roles that strengths and resilience play in this process. This work may provide guidance for those in the helping professions as we work to create a supportive space that will foster a sense of empowerment and enable women to live abuse free lives.

Six primary themes emerged as descriptive of women’s experiences within an
abusive relationship, based on open ended interview questions aimed at answering three broad research questions. Their stories shed light into the development of the relationship and participants were asked to discuss their unfolding experiences from early relationship formation, to the process of eventually leaving, along with what they encountered after leaving the relationship and their experiences staying out and living abuse free lives. Included with the themes that detailed the chronology of the relationships, the roles of culture and faith emerged, in addition to suggestions that reflected these women’s desire to give back and help service providers or other women who are in similar circumstances. Within the primary themes, several subthemes are highlighted, each with categories within their respective subtheme.

Participants early relationship experiences are described as containing many positive moments that overwhelmed women and made them feel special. As a result, women were caught “off guard” when they encountered abuse. Along with the intensity of positive experiences, abusive behaviors gradually progressed overtime but were not initially recognized due to their subtle nature. Abuser characteristics and women’s life experiences shed light into the contributing factors that may have placed these women in more vulnerable positions and increased risk of experiencing violence.

Within the process of leaving, participants described a period of time from the moment they decided to leave to the actual exiting event, which included activities such as planning, mental preparation, and multiple attempts to leave. Similarly, women’s strengths and barriers were noted, in addition to factors that assisted them in overcoming their barriers. Their stories of life after leaving the relationship are described as
containing both positive and negative experiences. As women learned to make meaning of their experiences, they developed skills and tapped into their strengths that helped them stay out and re-create their lives. For some women, the roles of culture and faith were at the forefront. Lastly, women had an awareness of gender role stereotypes, and while many did not fit into these stereotypes others acknowledge the role this may have played in the relationship.

Subtle Nature of Developing Abusive Relationships and Emotional Attachment

During the early part of the relationship, the road to abuse for these women was described as slow and subtle. Women provided examples of how their abusers gained their trust through intense positive behaviors that included physical affection, attention, and verbal expressions of love. The intense positivity assisted in the formation of emotional bonds and attachments. Women further described how their own naïveté, lack of awareness, or vulnerabilities coupled with the strong emotional bond placed them at risk for experiencing abuse and in situations where they didn’t realize what was happening until they were in too deep. Their experiences reflected alternating moments of intense positives and some form of abuse (e.g., verbal, emotional).

As previously noted the intensification of positive behaviors—the gaining of trust—laid the foundation for control and manipulation at the hands of their more powerful partner. Consistent with the literature, this developmental process may again be better understood by the previously noted phenomenon described as traumatic bonding
Evidence of power imbalance (e.g., participants dominated by abuser) and intermittent abuse that was offset by positive behaviors (e.g., apologizing, acting lovingly) was demonstrated in these women’s stories. Similarly, women described the early stages of their relationship in intensely positive terms, and were caught off guard by the first incidences of relatively less severe abuse (e.g., name calling). Subsequently, partners’ demonstrated remorse for their actions, thus perpetuating hope and belief that the abuse would not occur again. The cycle of betrayal and forgiveness further entrenched their emotional ties. According to Dutton and Painter, the lack of initial severity and subsequent remorse, coupled with the view that the initial incident is a “rare” occurrence during a time in the relationship when things were “good” and new, served to strengthen the emotional attachment.

**Women as Active Survivors—Not Passive Victims**

Among the many myths that exist, one in particular characterizes abused women as passive (Gortner et al., 1997). It was evidenced in these women’s stories that they made active efforts to survive the abuse. Survival was an active process that took mental energy, being attuned to their partner’s behavior and choosing methods for coping. The power of surviving behaviors with regards to coping is important to note. As a means to survive, the women in this study employed coping strategies that helped them endure and stay alive. Coping in the context of their abuse took a variety of forms. Some of the survivors shared that they gave in, focused on work, used substances, self-silenced, and other strategies. The stories they told provided a better understanding of the coping
strategies they utilized, which did indeed help them and were clearly functional during that period in their lives. Likewise, there was purpose and reason to the type of coping they employed, which effectively kept them and their children alive. While at times the tendency might be to pathologize the ways in which women coped and to question their behavior (e.g., remaining silent); it is important to recognize that labeling abused individuals’ coping strategies as “unhealthy” or “dysfunctional” does not capture the entire picture of their experience and once again places blame on individuals who are in these types of relationships for their own abuse.

The literature describes the process of leaving as active, involving planning, repeated efforts, developing skills and resources over time. New skills may be learned, new ways of thinking may evolve, and changes in emotional attachment may occur with each leaving attempt that pave the way for women to permanently leave the relationship (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). The women in this study appeared to go through the phases described in Anderson and Saunders, and their stories demonstrated ways in which these women attempted to manage and endure the violence they experienced. This “managing and enduring” phase may best be characterized by the use of coping strategies mentioned previously. For some this meant they had to become someone else and an “extension” of the abuser.

Second, there came a time in each woman’s life in which the abuse was acknowledged and identified for what it was; DV. Reframing or developing discrepancies occurred as they learned more about DV and encountered other viewpoints. These assisted in counteracting the abuse. In the final phase there came a point at which women
made attempts to disengage and break free from the abuse. For some of the women it took several years of planning and trying; others described it as “running” from the abuse. As noted in their stories that described life after leaving, these women demonstrated how they began to focus on their own needs and for those with children this included focusing on the needs of their children. Hence, the mental and physical energy expended on coping, planning, learning, attempting, leaving and staying out, serve to demonstrate that it is erroneous to continue to characterize survivors as passive.

**Mechanisms that Assist Leaving**

As described above, leaving has been found to be an active process; however, material resources (e.g., financial), social supports, institutional supports, and internal resources (e.g., self-efficacy; locus of control) have been found to be crucial in living an independent life (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Kim & Gray, 2008). In this study, systemic structures that included agencies, police, and courts, along with supportive interpersonal relationships and individual intrapersonal factors all served a function in women’s leaving process. These not only assisted with mental preparation and learning experiences, but they also contributed to the shifting identities of these women. Agencies provided resources that included availability of support groups, life skills groups, shelters, advocates, and assistance with the legal process. Police who responded appropriately in a compassionate and non-judgmental manner were found to be the most helpful. Courts that gave women a voice and validated women’s experiences, avoided retraumatization, and helped to foster a sense that their well-being was important and that
justice would be served. Additionally, the role of supportive friends, family, co-workers/employers, and other survivors provided women with much healthier love, validation that they were capable beings, hope and “model” of a better life without abuse.

Lastly, recognition of their intrapersonal characteristics also played a vital role. These women described ways in which their inner strength, perseverance, determination, ambition, intelligence, and hopefulness manifested in their lives and kept them going. Consistent with previous literature on strengths and resilience (Hill, 2009), all of the above were noted to be multiple sources of strength and in varying ways enhanced the resiliency of these survivors. Intrapersonal sources of strength that were illuminated in their stories such as perseverance, hopefulness, and determination point to their inner resilience. The ability for these women to move forward, recreate their lives and find meaning provides further evidence of these. Additionally, escalation of abuse and the realization that the relationship was not going to change also contributed to the leaving process for these women. In concert, all these increased readiness to leave, served as sources of empowerment, and helped these women move beyond the abuse. It is also important to recognize that these women faced obstacles (e.g., lack of resources, support) that had to be overcome. A salient obstacle that all identified was intense fear. Kim and Gray (2008) also reported that high levels of fear can be a barrier to leaving. Individuals in these situations have valid reasons to fear that their lives; the lives of loved ones and their children are in jeopardy and, as such they may do what it takes to keep them safe (e.g., remain silent, stay). Women shared that they overcame many of these obstacles, including paralyzing fear, via available support systems (e.g., women’s center, on-line
spiritual leaders), utilizing inner sources of strength (e.g., determination, hope for better future), and speaking out about the abuse. Thus, providing supportive social environments (e.g., responsive advocates, spiritual/religious leaders, legal system, and therapists) and creating a space for survivors to be heard can serve to help women tap into their inner strength, be a catalyst for change in shifting identities as demonstrated in their shift from *victim to survivor*, aid in facing their fears, and eventually assist as they leave the violent relationship.

**Recommendations**

The purpose of qualitative research is to highlight the lived experiences of participants themselves; thus, generalizations cannot be made. However, although generalizations are not made with respect to this phenomenon, there was consistency of themes across women’s stories and experiences commonalities that women who experienced DV share, yet each experience was unique, specific, and reflective of the individual survivor. However, based on the information gathered from these stories, the following recommendations for policy and service providers are made. First, while contemporary U.S. culture might embrace beliefs that adults are independent, autonomous, and can make their own decisions (and “should” be able to defend and protect themselves and those in their care), it is crucial to understand the nature and the development of abusive relationships. Without an understanding of key factors that are at play, such as impact of power imbalance on emotional attachments, vulnerabilities and abuser behaviors that serve to maintain power and control, and the systemic, social, and
intrapersonal barriers to leaving, there is danger in perpetuating stereotypes of abused individuals, ineffectively intervening and working in a way that further places blame or becomes an obstacle to leaving violent relationships. As evidenced in these women’s stories, it is also important to understand that if abused individuals encounter police officers who blame them, who do not seek to inquire if women are minimizing the nature of the abuse out of fear, or inquire if they are taking full responsibility for the abuse out of fear for their lives, they are inadvertently creating an aversive experience and the negative effects of these interactions are not easily overcome. As a result, individuals may distrust, fear calling the police, or have low confidence that police will be of help during a subsequent violent episode. Similarly, advocates or other victim service providers can better serve individuals by being actively present, engaged, and more than just “a body.” Maintaining contact, providing resources, assisting in legal proceedings, and ensuring survivors’ voices are heard can provide the support that is needed especially right after an individual has left the relationship, which is a particularly vulnerable and dangerous time. Further, lawyers who tend to be dismissive or tell those in need of assistance to “chalk it up to a bad experience” not only invalidate their experience but further serve as obstacles; court systems that drag individuals through lengthy proceedings and allow inappropriate plea deals to go through are not only at risk of re-traumatizing individuals but they can be a hindrance to leaving abuse.

Women shared both positive and negative experiences of therapy, while most found therapy helpful in staying out and in their healing process, the form of therapy that seemed to have the greatest impact was a group format. These group settings provide
exposure to similar others (i.e., to those are still in abusive relationships, attempting to leave, or who have been able to extricate themselves from the abuse), thus providing a space of support, understanding, and acceptance—a space where corrective experiences can occur via learning and skill building and a space that enables their voices to be heard. Given that much was gained from DV support groups, it makes sense for shelters and other service agencies to continue offering this type of therapy. Likewise, since local community/recreation centers tend to offer workshops or other type of health related classes, it may make sense to offer a class or workshop specifically providing DV information or support.

With regard to individual therapy, clinicians who were unskilled in working with matters of DV tended to be those who were viewed as having an agenda, appeared appalled or shocked at the stories they heard, and did not honor clients’ timing or autonomy. If clinicians are to work with individuals who are currently in abusive relationships or who are out and healing, it is critical that the work is collaborative in nature, that clinicians have some awareness that the stories they are about to hear are traumatic and unpleasant, that they respect survivors’ autonomy, demonstrate understanding and honor their time frames, and provide a safe space that fosters growth and empowerment. Survivors make attempts to understand what happened to them, and it is possible that in this process, they may erroneously place blame on themselves for the ways in which they coped. A way clinicians or other service providers can assist during this process is by providing basic knowledge regarding power/control, discussing vulnerabilities and how those were taken advantage of by a more powerful partner,
discussing various coping strategies, and validating the difficulty of their situation. It is also important to recognize that vilification of the abusive partner will likely place the individual in a position to defend the partner given the strength of emotional attachment and that they indeed experience positive moments with their partners. Therefore, acknowledging both sides of the abuser, yet still providing victims with information about abuser characteristics and behaviors, may help them come to their own conclusion that the pattern of abusive behavior is not likely to end on its own and that they are not responsible for their abusive partner’s behavior. Through DV trainings, review of the literature, and examination of best practice procedures, which will help to enhance their knowledge base, policy makers and service providers may find themselves better equipped in dealing with these matters.

Second, unlike many other issues/causes that have more public exposure, DV is a proverbial elephant in society’s living room that no one wants to discuss. As previously noted, the cost to society is in the billions, lives are lost daily, and the intergenerational transmission of abuse continues. Without more public awareness and willingness to be open about this issue, it is likely that future generations will continue to be impacted by DV. Several survivors in this study discussed this issue specifically and noted the importance of talking and bringing more awareness to this topic. Utilizing suggestions that they gave, more public awareness of the matter would benefit all of society. Similar to tobacco or other health related commercials and campaigns, commercials and other social media outlets that bring awareness may help educate the public and make it less of a “taboo” topic and it may help change the way we think of DV.
Similarly, several women noted having abusive backgrounds as young children, in which violence was experienced or witnessed in the home. Therefore, tackling the issue of intergenerational transmission of violence by providing early awareness via prevention/intervention services makes sense. This can be done by providing services to school age children and adolescents that teach them how to stay safe, how to ask for help and to learn what healthy relationships look like, in turn making it possible to prevent the transmission of violence to future generations. Talking about DV and providing more funding can also help bring more awareness to the availability of resources. Some of the women described how they were unaware of the resources available to them, either because they were not easily accessible (e.g., support groups taking place only in the context of shelters) or because they did not exist in their community. While larger cities tend to have more availability of resources, smaller communities may not, and as a result individuals in those communities are at a disadvantage with regard to getting the support they need. Ensuring that small towns have the needed resources, that agencies or community centers work together to disseminate information can be a way to address this matter.

Finally, the strength and resilience of these women came through in their stories. While at times it was noticeably painful for them to recount the events from their abusive relationship, they utilized strengths and demonstrated resilience in the face of traumatizing experiences. Additionally, they noted that sharing was a way for them to heal, to give back, and it also served as a source of empowerment. The stronger, more empowered, and better equipped they felt, the less likely it was that they would return to
an abusive situation. For these survivors, it was particularly important that their stories contributed to the research and others may in turn be helped. Because control was taken away, their lives dramatically altered it is important to recognize that leaving the abuse is not the end of the journey for them. Dealing with the after effects of the trauma is something many of them were unprepared for and had no awareness of, therefore providing support and a space for women to heal becomes important. One way to provide support can be through therapeutic means, other ways can include providing platforms for women to share their stories with others via support groups, creative outlets (e.g., writing, filming), or public speaking groups. For example, in one of the states where I conducted this research, an established committee of survivors went around and shared their stories with the public, not only did this provide them with an opportunity to give back but it enabled them heal, regain control; it further empowered them, and most importantly gave meaning to their experience.

**Limitations**

A common critique of qualitative research is the limitation to generalizability because of the small sample design (Creswell, 2009; Glesne, 2006). However, the goal of qualitative work is not to generalize findings to populations, but to articulate a deep and rich summary of lived experience. For this study, only female survivors were utilized, and as such males’ voices were not represented in this sample of survivors. In future, a qualitative study focusing on male’s experiences might help us understand the phenomenon from another perspective. Similarly, males in this study were the abusers
and we know that women also abuse; however, our sample is not representative of women abusers. Expanding research to women abusers may help us understand typical characteristics of female abusers and any similarity or differences to their male counterparts. The women in this study were coupled heterosexually at the time of their abuse however, we know that abuse also occurs among same-sex couples and is just as serious and dangerous as it is within heterosexual couple’s relationships (Seelau & Seelau, 2005). Therefore, further studies involving LGBTQ populations would be beneficial and are much needed.

Additionally, it was difficult to sort out women’s vulnerabilities as there were layers upon layers of trauma and multiple contributing factors to vulnerability that were interwoven within their stories. Therefore, it can be difficult to identify, weight, or know how sources of vulnerability all interact with one another, and whether there is one or a combination of contributing factors that places someone at risk. Lastly, the cultural, faith and spirituality piece of this research was limited, yielding few results. Therefore, in order to gain more insights in the roles of these in the lives of survivors during and after abuse, it would be beneficial to expand on these pieces in future work.

Conclusion

This study provided insights into the lived experiences of thirteen DV survivors. Their journeys beginning from the onset of the relationship to life after leaving highlight the importance of understanding initial relationship development, their vulnerabilities and abuser characteristics and behaviors that placed them at risk for abuse. Within the context
of their relationships, women noted a slow and subtle path to abuse and the emotional bonds they developed that for a period of time kept them in their abusive relationships. While in the abusive relationships, these women shed light into the various ways they coped with the abuse that helped them endure traumatizing experiences. Although coping took a variety of forms, women were actively engaged in their survival, demonstrating strength and resilience. Difficulties women encountered after leaving their relationships were brought to light and a better understanding of the leaving process was provided. From their own stories, mechanisms that assisted in leaving were identified and once again strengths and resiliency was evident in their stories. Some of these same intrapersonal, social context, and systemic mechanisms that assisted in leaving were the same that have helped them overcome barriers, feel empowered and stay out, and move on to the healing process. Finally, for all the women in this study, giving back and helping others with their stories not only provided a sense of empowerment but helped them give meaning to their experience. This is most evident in their willingness to share personally private information with a complete stranger in hopes that their stories make a difference and help bring awareness to this issue of DV.

As part of qualitative methodology it is commonly recognized that the researcher is immersed in the project in order to comprehend a phenomena from the perspectives of the participants. Additionally, researchers are encouraged to be reflective about their own perspectives, biases, expectations, and values, and closely monitor how these may assist or hinder the study. As I embarked on this project, I worked hard to maintain awareness of biases, assumptions, feelings, and perspectives I hold with regard to this topic due to
personal experiences that have shaped my view of women’s roles, social inequities, and patriarchy. As I listened to these women’s stories I was moved, angered, and saddened by the many injustices these women encountered, the lack of understanding by society as a whole, the lack of attention and resources, and the traumatic experiences of these women. At the same time, I sat with feelings of admiration and respect for these women and was encouraged by the progress that has taken place over the years and the hard work agencies and service providers are doing in order to end DV. As I reflect, I am aware that there were times during our meetings that I wished I could do more than offer compassion and a safe space for them to tell their stories and at times I felt frustrated that I was not doing enough. In spite of this, I was and am grateful for the opportunity that they gave me. I was touched by their openness and willingness to share which enabled me to learn and grow. They have taught me that the journey continues—a lesson I am thankful to have received. Indeed they are strong, powerful, and resilient survivors.
REFERENCES


Appendix A

Recruitment Flyers (English and Spanish)
Are you a survivor?
Willing to share your story and make your voice heard?

We are now recruiting women ages 18 and older who identify as a survivor of domestic violence to participate in a study regarding their experience of survival in the midst of living through domestic violence. To participate in the study, you must be a woman who was once involved in an abusive romantic relationship for 3 months or longer and NOT currently involved in that or any other abusive relationship. Study participation is confidential and includes one 60-90 minute interview with the option to participate in additional phases of the study. Individual interview participation pays $15; participation in the focus group pays an additional $10.

Who are we? Annel Cordero and Dr. Renee Galliher from USU’s Psychology Department are the researchers for this study. Annel has several years experience working to help women overcome abusive relationships. Both she and Dr. Galliher focus their professional work on healthy relationship development.

Please call or email to find out additional information!
¿Usted es Sobreviviente?
¿Dispuesta a compartir su historia y hacer que su voz se escuché?

Estamos reclutando mujeres de 18 y mayor que se identifican como sobrevivientes de violencia doméstica para participar en un estudio con respecto a sus experiencias de sobrevivencia al vivir a través de violencia doméstica. Para participar en el estudio, debe ser una que alguna vez estuvo involucrada en una relación romántica abusiva por 3 meses o más y no está al presente involucrada en esta relación o algún otra relación abusiva. La participación en el estudio es confidencial e incluye una entrevista de 60 a 90 minutos con la opción de participar enfaces adicionales del estudio. La participación individual en la entrevista paga $15.00; la participación en el grupo de enfoque paga $10.00 adicionales.

¿Quién somos? Annel Cordero y la Dr. Renee Galliher del departamento de Psicología de USU son las investigadoras de este estudio. Annel tiene varios años de experiencia trabajando para ayudar a mujeres a superar relaciones injuriosas. Ella y la Dr. Galliher enfocan su trabajo profesional en el desarrollo de una relación saludable.

¡Favor de llamar o comunicarse por correo electrónico para obtener más información!
Appendix B

Screener-Abuse History Questionnaire
Screener-Abuse History Questionnaire

ID#: __________

Are you currently in a relationship? Yes No

How long did your abusive relationship last? (Less than 3 months-**NOT** eligible)

If **NO**-when was your last relationship? **Go to questions in set B.**

If **YES**-ask questions in set A first-then ask questions in Set B.

**SET A:** In your CURRENT relationship does your partner:

*(If one or more questions answered **YES**-**NOT** eligible for study)*

- ☐ Embarrass you with bad names and put-downs/destructive criticism?
- ☐ Intimidates you; looks at you or act in ways that scare you?
- ☐ Control what you do, who you see or talk to, or where you go/monitors phone calls?
- ☐ Stop you from seeing or talking to friends or family or insists on going everywhere with you?
- ☐ Take your money or Social Security, make you ask for money, or refuse to give you money?
- ☐ Make all the decisions? (follow up-Does not allow you to make decisions/gets upset if you make a decision?)
- ☐ Doesn’t allow you to have a job/go to school/keeps you from having a job-going to school?
- ☐ Tell you you’re a bad parent or threaten to take away or hurt your children?
- ☐ Act like the abuse is no big deal, it’s your fault, or even deny doing it?
- ☐ Abuses your trust by lying, hiding important information and papers, cheating or being inappropriately jealous (accuses you of having affairs).
- ☐ Harasses you by following you or checking up on you?
- ☐ Destroy your property, household items, or threaten to kill your pets?
- ☐ Intimidate you with guns, knives or other weapons?
- ☐ Shove you, slap you, kicks, bites, burns, chokes or hit you?
- ☐ Forces/pressures you to have sex or perform sexual acts against your will?
- ☐ Force you to lie to your family, friends and doctor about your bruises, cuts and scratches?
Tell you that he or she will stop beating you when you start behaving yourself?

- Force you to drop charges?

- Threaten to commit suicide if you leave?

- Threaten to kill you or others you love?

SET B: In your Past/most recent abusive relationship did your partner:

(If one or more questions answered YES eligible for study)

- Embarrass you with bad names and put-downs/destructive criticism?

- Intimidate you; look at you or act in ways that scared you?

- Control what you did, who you saw or talked to, or where you went/monitored phone calls?

- Stop you from seeing or talking to friends or family or insisted on going everywhere with you?

- Take your money or Social Security, make you ask for money, or refuse to give you money?

- Make all the decisions? (follow up-Does not allow you to make decisions/gets upset if you make a decision?)

- Not allow you to have a job/go to school/kept you from having a job going to school?

- Tell you you’re a bad parent or threaten to take away or hurt your children?

- Act like the abuse is no big deal, it’s your fault, or even deny doing it?

- Abused your trust by lying, hiding important information and papers, cheating or being inappropriately jealous (accused you of having affairs).

- Harass you by following you or checking up on you?

- Destroy your property, household items, or threaten to kill your pets?

- Intimidate you with guns, knives or other weapons?

- Shove you, slap you, kick, bite, burn, choke or hit you?

- Force/pressure you to have sex or perform sexual acts against your will?
☐ Force you to lie to your family, friends and doctor about your bruises, cuts and scratches?
☐ Tell you that he or she would stop beating you when you started behaving yourself?
☐ Force you to drop charges?
☐ Threaten to commit suicide if you left?
☐ Threaten to kill you or others you love?

How many abusive relationships have you been in during your life time?

How many attempts did it take for you to finally leave your most recent abusive relationship?

How long ago was your most recent abusive relationship?
Appendix C

Informed Consent (English and Spanish)
INFORMED CONSENT


Introduction/ Purpose: Annel Cordero, a doctoral student in the Department of Psychology at Utah State University and Professor Renee Galliher in the Department of Psychology at Utah State University are conducting a research study to understand the experiences of female survivors of domestic violence and what they determine to be important in promoting their ability to leave violent relationships. We are both active in supporting issues pertaining to women’s health and focus our work on healthy relationship development. We hope that our research can be used to further support persons attempting to overcome abusive relationships. There will be approximately 10-15 total participants in this research study.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this research study, the following will happen to you. After a brief screening interview to determine your eligibility and willingness to participate, you will be interviewed regarding your experience of surviving through an abusive relationship. The interviews are expected to last between 60 and 90 minutes. It will be audio taped by the interviewer. The interview will later be transcribed and coded by our research team. If you choose, transcriptions will be sent to you for content verification and clarification. Secondly, you will have the option to participate in the focus group portion of the study. The focus group will involve a small group discussion with other female adult participants regarding experiences related to surviving domestic violence. The focus group will be conducted in English and only those who can participate in English will be eligible for the focus group part of the study. However, if enough Spanish speaking women are interested in focus group participation, a second Spanish focus group will be conducted. The focus group is expected to last between 60-90 minutes. It will be audio taped by the interviewer. The focus group will later be transcribed and coded by our research team.

New Findings: During the course of this research study, you will be informed of any significant new findings (either good or bad), such as changes in the risks or benefits resulting from participation in the research, or new alternatives to participation that might cause you to change your mind about continuing in the study. If new information is obtained that is relevant or useful to you, or if the procedures and/or methods change at any time throughout this study, your consent to continue participating in this study will be obtained again.
**Risks**  Participation in this research study may involve some added risks or discomforts. Some people may not want to be audio taped or share personal information. You will have the opportunity to decline to answer the interviewer’s questions if desired. Additionally, it is possible that your personal information might be inadvertently seen by others during mail or email transmission. However, we will work closely with you to best ensure your privacy throughout the study. Utah law requires researchers to report certain information to the authorities. This includes threat of harm to self or others, or abuse of a minor by an adult, or ongoing current witnessing of domestic violence by a minor.

**Benefits**  There may or may not be any direct benefit to you from these procedures. We hope that you benefit from the opportunity to explore and understand your relationship experiences. The information will help us learn more about factors that promote and support leaving behaviors (e.g., sources of strength and resilience). In addition, it will aid us in further supporting effective ways to work with those in abusive relationships and efforts to end domestic violence.

**Explanation & offer to answer questions**  Annel Cordero has explained this research study to you and answered your questions. If you have any further questions, please contact Annel Cordero at (435) 797-8254 or at annel.cordero5@gmail.com. You can also contact the Principal Investigator, Professor Renee Galliher at (435) 797-3391.

**Extra Cost(s)**  There will not be any additional costs in participating in this research study.

**Payment/Compensation**  You will be paid for participation in each phase of the study: $15 for interview participation, and $10 for focus group participation. *(If you will receive payments, gift cards or similar items of value for participating in this research,* the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) has determined that if the amount you get from this study, plus any prior amounts you have received from USU since January of this year total $600 or more, USU must report this income to the federal government. If you are a USU employee, any payment you receive from this study will be included in your regular payroll).

**Voluntary nature of participation and right to withdraw without consequence**  Participation in research is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without consequence or loss of benefits. The researcher may also determine that you do not meet required criteria for participation.

**Confidentiality**  Research records will be kept confidential, consistent with federal and state regulations. Only the research team will see the data. All information will be locked in a filing cabinet in a locked room. The digital audio file will only have an ID number and not your name. Your name will not be used in any report about this research. Audio recordings will be destroyed upon completion of transcription and review of the transcripts. All identifying information will be destroyed upon completion of analysis and dissemination of results to participants.

**IRB Approval Statement**  The Institutional Review Board for the protection of human participants at USU has approved this research study. If you have any pertinent questions or concerns about your rights or a research-related injury, and would like to contact someone other than the research team, you may contact the IRB Administrator at (435) 797-0567 or email irb@usu.edu to obtain information or to offer input.
**Copy of consent** You have been given two copies of this Informed Consent. Please sign both copies and retain one copy for your files.

**Investigator Statement** “I certify that the research study has been explained to the individual, by me or my research staff, and that the individual understands the nature and purpose, the possible risks and benefits associated with taking part in this research study. Any questions that have been raised have been answered.”

**Signature of Researcher(s)**

_______________________________  ______________________________
Renee V. Galliher, Ph.D.    Annel Cordero
Principal Investigator     Student Researcher
(435) 797-3391             (435) 797-8254
Renee.Galliher@usu.edu     annel.cordero5@gmail.com

**Signature of Participant** By signing below, I agree to participate.

_______________________________  ______________________________
Participant’s signature     Date
CONSENTIMIENTO

Entiendo Las Experiencias de Mujeres Que Han Sobrevivido la Violencia Domestica: Factores Que Promueven y Apoyan a Mujeres Para Salir de Relaciones Violentas.

Introducción/Propósito: Annel Cordero, estudiante de doctorado en el Departamento de Psicología en la Universidad Estatal de Utah (Utah State University) y la Profesora Renee Galliher del departamento de Psicología en la Universidad Estatal de Utah (Utah State University) están conduciendo un estudio para entender experiencias de mujeres que han sobrevivido la violencia domestica y lo que ellas determinan ser importante para promover su habilidad para salir de relaciones violentas. Las dos estamos apoyando activamente asuntos pertinentes a la salud de la mujer y enfocamos nuestro trabajo en el desarrollo de relaciones saludables. Esperamos que nuestro estudio pueda ser usado para seguir apoyando a personas que están intentando de superar relaciones injuriosas.

Habrá aproximadamente de 10-15 participantes en total en este estudio.

Procedimientos Si usted accede a participar en este estudio, lo siguiente ocurrirá. Después de una breve entrevista para determinar su elegibilidad y su voluntad para participar, será entrevistada respecto a su experiencia de sobrevivencia a través de una relación injuriosa. La entrevista tendrá una duración de entre 60 and 90 minutos. Será grabada en audio por la entrevistadora.

Después la entrevista será transcripta y codificada por nuestro equipo de estudio. Si usted desea, se le enviaran los transcriptos para verificación y aclaración del contenido. En Segundo lugar, usted tendrá la opción de participar en la porción de grupo de enfoque del estudio. El grupo de enfoque consistirá de una plática en un grupo pequeño con otras participantes con respecto a experiencias relacionadas a la sobrevivencia a violencia domestica. El grupo de enfoque será conducido en Ingles solo las personas que puedan participar en Ingles serán elegibles para participar en la porción del grupo de enfoque. Sin embargo, si hay suficientes mujeres de habla Hispana, interesadas en participar en el grupo de enfoque, un segundo grupo de enfoque en Español será conducido. El grupo de enfoque tendrá una duración de entre 60-90 minutos. Será grabado en audio por la entrevistadora. Después el grupo de enfoque será transcripto y codificado por nuestro equipo de estudio.

Nuevos Descubrimientos Durante el curso de este estudio, usted será informada de cualquier Nuevo descubrimiento significante (ya sea bueno o malo), tal como cambios en los riesgos o beneficios que resulten de su participación en el estudio, o nuevas
alternativas a su participación que pueda causar que usted cambie de opinión en cuanto a continuar su participación en el estudio. Si se obtiene nueva información que sea relevante o útil para usted, o si en cualquier tiempo los procedimientos y/o los métodos cambian durante el estudio, se le pedirá su consentimiento para continuar su participación en el estudio de nuevo.

**Riegos** La participación en este estudio puede involucrar algunos riegos adicionales o molestias. Algunas personas no querrán ser grabadas o compartir información personal. Usted tendrá la oportunidad de reusar contestar las preguntas de la entrevistadora si usted gusta. Además, es posible que su información pueda ser vista inadvertidamente por otras personas durante la transmisión por correo o correo electrónico. Sin embargo trabajáramos juntamente con usted para mejor asegura su privacidad durante el estudio.

Las leyes de Utah requieren a investigadores dar parte a las autoridades cierta información. Esto incluye amenaza de daño a sí mismo o a otros, o abuso de menores por un adulto, o ser testigo constante de violencia domestica por un menor.

**Beneficios** Puede haber o no haber cualquier beneficio directo a usted de estos procedimientos. Esperamos que usted se beneficie de la oportunidad de explorar y entender sus experiencias de relaciones de pareja. La información nos ayudara a aprender más sobre factores que promueven y apoyan a mujeres para salir de relaciones violentas (fuentes de fortaleza y resistencia). Adicionalmente, nos ayudara a seguir apoyando maneras efectivas de trabajar con personas en relaciones abusivas y esfuerzos para combatir y terminar con la violencia domestica.

**Explicaciones y oferta para contestar preguntas** Annel Cordero le ha explicado este estudio y contestado sus preguntas. Si usted tiene cualquier otra pregunta, favor de comunicarse con Annel Cordero a (435) 797-8254 o annel.cordero5@gmail.com. También puede comunicarse con la Principal Investigadora, Profesora Renee Galliher at (435) 797-3391.

**Costos Extra** No habrá ningún costo adicional para participar en este estudio.

**Pago/Compensación** A usted se le pagara por su participación en cada fase del estudio: $15 por su participación en la entrevista, y $10 por su participación en grupo de enfoque. Si usted recibe pagos, tarjetas de regalos o artículos similares de valor por participar en este estudio, el departamento de rentas internas (IRS) ha determinado que si la cantidad que usted recibe de este estudio, mas cualquier cantidad anterior que halla recibido de USU desde Enero de este año tiene un total de $600 o más, USU debe reportar este ingreso al gobierno federal. Si usted es empleado de USU, cualquier pago que reciba de este estudio será incluido en su pago regular.

**Naturaleza voluntaria de participación y el derecho a retirarse sin consecuencia** Participación en la investigación es totalmente voluntaria. Usted puede negarse a participar o retirarse del estudio en cualquier momento sin consecuencia o pérdida de beneficios. Usted puede ser retirado de El investigador también puede determinar que usted no cumple con los criterios necesarios para la participación.

**Confidencialidad** Los expedientes de este estudio serán mantenidos de una manera confidencial consistente con los reglamentos federales y estatales. Solo el equipo del estudio vera estos datos. Toda información será guardada bajo llave en un archivo en un cuarto cerrado con llave.
El audio digital solo tendrá un número de identificación y no tendrá su nombre. Su nombre no será usado en ningún reporte acerca de este estudio. El audio digital será destruido al terminar y revisar las transcripciones. Cualquier información que le identifique será destruida al terminar el análisis y diseminación de los resultados a los participantes del estudio.

Declaración de Aprobación de IRB La mesa directiva del Instituto de Revisión para la protección de participantes humanos en USU ha aprobado este estudio. Si tiene alguna pregunta pertinente o preocupación acerca de sus derechos o perjuicios relacionados con este estudio, danos, relacionados con este estudio y quisiera hablar con alguien fuera del equipo de este estudio, puede comunicarse con el Administradora del IRB al (435) 797-0567 o correo electrónico irb@usu.edu para obtener información o ofrecer su aportación.

Copia de consentimiento Se le han dado dos copias de este Consentimiento de Información. Favor de firmar ambas copias y guardar una para sus archivos.

Declaración de la Investigadora “Yo certifico que el estudio ha sido explicado a la persona individual, por mi o personal de mi equipo, y que esta persona entiende la naturaleza y el propósito, los posibles riesgos y beneficios asociados al participar en este estudio. Cualquier pregunta que han surgido han sido contestadas.”

Firma de la(s) Investigadora(s)

Renee V. Galliher, Ph.D. Annel Cordero
Principal Investigator Student Researcher
(435) 797-3391 (435) 797-8254
Renee.Galliher@usu.edu annel.cordero5@gmail.com

Firma de la Participante Al firmar abajo, acepto participar.

Firma de la Participante Fecha
Appendix D

Demographic Information Form
Demographic Information Form

1. What is your age?_______

2. Which category best describes your racial/ethnic background?
   a. Latino/a
   b. Black/ African American
   c. Caucasian
   d. Asian/Pacific Islander
   e. American Indian
   f. Bi-racial/Multi-racial
   g. Other: (please specify)_______________________

3. What is your current religious affiliation, if any?
   a. LDS
   b. Episcopalian
   c. Lutheran
   d. Catholic
   e. Baptist
   f. Methodist
   g. Atheist
   h. Agnostic
   i. Hindu
   j. Buddhist
   k. Jewish
   l. Muslim
   m. None
   n. Other: (please specify)______________

4. How do you currently describe your sexual orientation:
   a. Heterosexual
   b. Gay/Lesbian
   c. Bisexual
   d. Transgendered
   e. Questioning
   f. Other: (please specify)________________________

5. What is your current marital status?
   _____single
   _____married
   _____unmarried, but partnered heterosexual
   _____unmarried, but partnered homosexually
   _____divorced
   _____widowed

*IF married or partnered-how long have you been in this relationship? __________

6. Are you a parent? _____Yes; _____No. If Yes, how many children? __________

7. Are you currently employed? _____Yes _____No
   *IF YES, What is your occupation?__________________________________
   *IF YES, how many hours per week?
   ____1-10
   ____11-20
   ____21-30
   ____31/more

8. Please indicate your present level of yearly income.
   _____$15,000 or less
   _____$15,000 - $24,999
   _____$25,000 - $34,999
   _____$35,000 - $49,999
   _____$50,000 - $74,999
   _____$75,000 - $99,999
   _____$100,000 - $149,999
   _____$150,000 - $199,000
   _____$200,000 - $299,000
   _____$300,000 - $500,000
   _____greater than $500,000
9. Highest level of education completed:
   a. Elementary school
   b. High school degree
   c. Some college
   d. College graduate
   e. Technical or trade school graduate
   f. Professional or graduate degree
   g. Other: *(please specify)*

10. How would you describe the community you grew up in? Circle one.
    a. Rural *(country)*
    b. Urban *(city)*
    c. Suburban *(subdivision)*
Appendix E

Interview Questions
Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your relationship.

   **Follow up prompts:**
   - What was the relationship like at the beginning?
   - What were some of the first signs that things were not going well?
   - When did the abuse begin?
   - What helped you live through that experience?
   - Can you describe your social resources and material supports?

2. Research suggests there are risk factors that may place individuals in vulnerable situations such as experiencing DV. Tell me what you consider to be risk factors in your own life.

   **Follow up prompts:**
   - What did you observe in your parents relationship(s)?
   - If applicable, tell me about any history of trauma that you have (e.g. sexual, emotional, or physical abuse)?
   - What were specific norms or practices in your community that might have contributed to this risk?

3. Can you explain or describe your experience in deciding to leave that situation?

   **Follow up prompts:**
   - What were some of the barriers you encountered in your efforts to leave, and how did you overcome those?
   - What do you consider to be your personal strengths?
   - What do you consider to be important in helping you eventually leave that situation?

4. Tell me about staying out of an abusive relationship.

   **Follow up prompt:**
   - What has helped you live an abuse free life?
   - Probe for experiences and sources of empowerment (e.g., getting an education, forming nurturing and supportive relationships, helping others).
CURRICULUM VITAE

ANNEL CORDERO

219 West 3875 South E-mail: annel.cordero5@gmail.com
Nibley, Utah 84321

EDUCATION:

Ph.D. Utah State University Logan, Utah
2014 Combined Clinical/Counseling/School Psychology (APA accredited)

Dissertation: Understanding Experiences of Female Survivors of Domestic Violence: Stories of Strength, Resilience, and Mechanisms that Assist in Leaving Violent Relationships
Chair: Renee V. Galliher, Ph.D.

Thesis Equivalency: Problem Solving Communication and Interpersonal Power among Latino Adolescent Couples
Chair: Renee V. Galliher, Ph.D.

Ph.D. Northern Arizona University Flagstaff, AZ
Transferred Counseling Psychology

M.A. Northern Arizona University Phoenix, AZ (extended campus)
2004 Counseling: Community Counseling (CACREP Accredited)

B.S. Northern Arizona University Flagstaff, AZ
2000 Elementary Education/Bilingual Multicultural Education
Summa Cum Laude

LICENSURE & CERTIFICATION:

State of Arizona Board of Behavioral Health Examiners
Licensed Professional Counselor
License Number LPC-13250
Converted from LAC-Issued June 1, 2009-Present

National Certified Counselor
Certificate Number -91518
Issued August 23, 2004, Renewed March 2010-Present

Arizona Department of Education Teacher Certification
Standard Elementary K-8
ESL/Bilingual Spanish Endorsement K-12
Issued June 25, 2002, Renewed, February 3, 2009-Present
LANGUAGES:

Bilingual: English/Spanish-Fluent (Speaking, Reading, Writing)

CLINICAL EXPERIENCE

8/2013-Current – Pre-doctoral Psychology Intern (APA Accredited)
Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ
Psychology Intern Therapist:
Responsibilities: Provide mental health services to diverse student populations in a university setting.
Presenting problems include: Depression, anxiety, behavioral concerns, ADHD, substance use, crisis and trauma, PTSD due to sexual abuse and domestic violence, phobias, Bi-polar Disorder, Schizophrenia and Borderline Disorder. Consult and collaborate with clinic staff, physicians, professors, and student advocate. Conduct psychological assessments, triage/crisis intervention, case management, and medical withdrawals as needed. Maintain required paperwork and records.

8/2011-6/2012 - Graduate Assistant: Advanced Clinical Assistantship
Bear River Mental Health, Logan Utah
Doctoral Psychology Student Therapist:
Responsibilities: Provide mental health services to diverse populations including children, families, and individuals and seriously mentally ill individuals in outpatient community mental health setting.
Presenting problems include: Depression, anxiety, behavioral concerns, medical concerns, ADHD, substance use, crisis and trauma, PTSD due to sexual abuse and domestic violence, phobias, Bi-polar Disorder, Schizophrenia and Borderline Disorder. Consult and collaborate with clinic staff, physicians, and psychiatrist. Conduct intakes, psychological and disability assessments, and mental health court evaluations as needed. Maintain required paperwork and records.

Supervisor: Roueida Ghadban, Ph.D.
Direct Contact Hours: 309  Total: 847

8/2011-6/2012 - Practicum Student
Utah State University- Multicultural Practicum Sites, Logan Utah
Practicum in Clinical Child/School Psychology
Doctoral Student Therapist:
Responsibilities: Provide individual, family and couples therapy to underserved populations with focus on Latino community at the following sites: Centro de la Familia Migrant Headstart, Fast Forward Charter High School and Logan High School.
Presenting Problems: Parenting concerns with toilet training, discipline, parent-child relationship, depression, anxiety, trauma, etc. Conduct classroom observations for head start when needed. Consult and collaborate with community members, agencies, and schools. Provide psycho-educational groups on a variety of topics: Parenting, Depression, Prevention/Intervention, etc. Conduct Intakes and assessments as needed. Maintain required paperwork and records.

Supervisor: Melanie Domenech-Rodriguez, Ph.D.
Direct Contact Hours: 109  Total: 364
8/ 2010- 5/2011 – **Advanced Clinical Practicum Student**  
Utah State University- Student Health and Wellness Center, Logan Utah  
Practicum in Counseling/Clinical Psychology  
Doctoral Student Therapist:  
Responsibilities: Provide mental health services to USU students within a primary care setting including: intake assessments, brief psychotherapy, behavioral consultation services, crisis consultation and collaboration with primary care providers and psychiatrist. Presenting problems include: ADHD, depression, anxiety, insomnia, substance abuse, sexual assault, body image and identity concerns.  
*Supervisor: Scott DeBerard, Ph.D.*  
*Direct Contact Hours: 123 Total: 514*

Utah State University-Advanced Practicum at Multicultural sites, Logan, Utah  
Doctoral Student Therapist:  
Responsibilities: Provide individual, family, and couples therapy to members of the Latino community residing in Logan and surrounding cities. Provide consultation services, brief presentations, and therapy at Centro de la Familia Migrant Headstart  
Presenting problems included: Depression, anxiety, grief and loss, health issues, PTSD, sexual abuse and domestic violence and parenting concerns.  
*Supervisor: Melanie Domenech-Rodriguez, Ph.D.*  
*Direct Contact Hours: 41 Total: 109*

8/ 2009-5/2010 - **Practicum Student**  
Utah State University-Psychology Community Clinic, Logan, Utah  
Integrated Practicum: Adult/ Adolescent, /Child  
Doctoral Student Therapist:  
*Supervisors: Susan Crowley, Ph.D; Kyle Hancock, Ph.D.*  
*Direct Contact Hours: 47 Total: 357*

Northern Arizona University-Psychology Community/Practicum Clinic, Flagstaff, AZ  
Doctoral Practicum in Professional Practice  
Doctoral Student Therapist:  
Responsibilities: Provide mental health services to NAU students and community members. Presenting problems: Adjustment and identity issues, career development, depression, anxiety, trauma, relationship issues, career counseling, etc. Conducted intakes and assessments and brief therapy as needed. Maintain records and paperwork. Provide crisis intervention as needed.  
*Supervisor: Timothy Thomason, Ph.D.*  
*Direct Contact Hours: 65 Total: 413*

1/2004 – 5/2004 - **Student Intern**  
Northern Arizona University-Southwest Behavioral Health, Phoenix, AZ  
SBH-Outpatient clinic  
Master Level Student Therapist
Responsibilities: Provided individual and family therapy to a small caseload of clients from diverse backgrounds including services to adults and children-in-home and in school settings. Worked collaboratively with school staff to provide services to children at Creighton school district sites. Provided case management, attend team meetings, trainings, and staffing.

Northern Arizona University- AZ Burn Center at Maricopa Medical Center, Phoenix, AZ
Master Level Student Therapist
Responsibilities: Provided psychological support to adults/adolescents/children burn survivors and their families in both Spanish and English. Conduct mental status exams, psychosocial and symptoms assessments. Attended multi-disciplinary meetings with staff involved in patient care including medical personnel. Gained skills in the area of Health Psychology. Maintain notes in accordance to hospital standards
Supervisors: Philip Barry, Ph.D.; Alysson Zatarga, LPC, & Y.Evie Garcia, Ph.D.
Direct Contact Hours: 293  Total: 615

9/ 2003-12/ 2003 - Practicum Student
Northern Arizona University- NAU Community Clinic, Phoenix, AZ
Master Level Student Therapist:
Responsibilities: Provide short-term therapy to community members and facilitate groups at community agency site. Presenting problems included: Parenting and family concerns, couples therapy and relationship issues, depression, anxiety, adjustment, career development, stress due to homelessness/ neglect, and identity concerns. Conduct intakes and assessments as needed. Maintain records and paperwork.
Supervisors: Jeni McCutcheon, Ph.D.; Y.Evie Garcia, Ph.D.
Direct Contact Hours: 41  Total: 135

PROFESSIONAL CLINICAL EXPERIENCE

Southwest Behavioral Health –School & Community Programs, Phoenix, AZ
Project safe Neighborhoods: West Valley
Responsibilities: Provide therapy and/or clinical case management for a full caseload of families or individual members. Provide community consultation and education to community agencies, schools, and neighborhood groups. Perform intakes, behavioral, developmental substance abuse and psychosocial assessments. Conduct therapy with families, children, adolescents, and adults (individually and in-group) within a brief therapy framework. Conduct home visits and case consultations with other agencies and organizations. Consult with clinical staff (case managers, family support partners, case aides, psychiatrists, support staff, etc.) and other community human service professionals. Assess client status and developed comprehensive treatment plans. Participate in community based activities. Maintain and complete documentation in accordance with SBH standards. Presenting problems: Substance use, parent-child relationship, depression, anxiety, mental health issues due to poverty, low education, teen pregnancy, incarceration, and other legal issues.
Supervisor: Alysson Zatarga, LPC
Total Hours: 960 (40 hrs. per week)
Southwest Human Development-Family Intervention/New Beginnings Program  
Responsibilities: Work collaboratively with ASU’s Prevention Research Center (PRC) to provide empirically based information for parents and children of divorce via weekly groups. Aid parents in promoting resilience in their children. Aid parents in acquiring or enhancing parenting skills; reduce children’s exposure to risk factors and reduce mental health problems. Promote competencies and increase children’s protective resources following a divorce. Keep in close contact with ASU’s PRC director of training by attending ongoing supervision training. Provide ongoing feedback about the program.  
*Supervisors: Kathryn Wilcox Doyle, Ph.D.*  
*Total Hours: 340 (10-20 hrs. per week)*

Southwest Human Development Headstart - Family Health and Wellness Mental Health Department, Phoenix, AZ  
Responsibilities: Provide therapeutic services to families and individuals enrolled in the Headstart Preschool Program and the Infant Toddler Program. Conducted educational interventions regarding healthy relationships, parenting, and domestic violence  
Presenting issues: Individual counseling of Latina women experiencing domestic violence and sexual abuse trauma. Counseled individuals on an array of personal issues including acculturative stress, depression, anxiety, and other emotional issues and/or adaptive functioning. Co-facilitate support group for adolescent mothers enrolled in the Teen program  
Function as a member with co-workers and the community to build productive and collaborative relationships. Attend and provide mental health perspective at Multi-disciplinary team meetings. Co-facilitate support group for Headstart Family Support Specialists  
Consult with the Arizona Coalition Against Domestic Violence in order to obtain the newest information and resources for the agency and to support clients effectively. Provide training and/or workshops for parents enrolled in the Headstart program and the Community Development Division of Southwest Human Development  
*Supervisors: Shelley Ratliff, Jane Meier, LCSW, Douglas Albrecht, Ph.D. & Lorenzo Azzi, Ph.D*  
*Total Hours: 6,854 (40 hrs. per week)*

Parents Anonymous of Arizona Inc., Phoenix, AZ  
Responsibilities: Provided support to families of diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds as a parent aide. Provide educational interventions regarding parenting  
Facilitated parenting groups for Spanish speaking families regarding child development and positive discipline; provide case management. Presenting problems: Parenting issues, domestic violence, Child Protective Services (CPS) involvement.  
*Supervisor: Nicki Hoffman-Zoebel, LCSW*  
*Total Hours: 900 (30hrs. per week)*

**SUPERVISION EXPERIENCE**

8/2014-5/2014 - **Graduate Student Supervisor**  
Doctoral Level Student Supervisor  
Arizona State University- ASU Counseling Services, Tempe, AZ  
Responsibilities: Supervised a Doctoral level student clinician conducting therapy at the ASU
Conducted weekly one-on-one supervision to discuss client/therapist issues, conducted video supervision of students’ clinical work. Maintained supervisee files and all video recordings of supervision with supervisees. Worked under the supervision of primary supervisor to provide effective clinical supervision to supervisees.

Supervisor: Tom DeStefano, Ph.D.

8/2008-12/2008 - Graduate Student Supervisor
Doctoral Level Student Supervisor
Northern Arizona University- Psychology Community/Practicum Clinic, Flagstaff, AZ
Responsibilities: Supervised two Master level student clinicians conducting therapy at the NAU clinic. Conducted weekly one-on-one supervision to discuss client/therapist issues, conducted both live and video supervision of students’ clinical work. Maintained supervisee files and all video recordings of my supervision with supervisees. Worked under the supervision of course instructor to provide effective clinical supervision to supervisees.

20 direct hours
Supervisor: Tom DeStefano, Ph.D.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

8/2010-5/2011 & 8/2012-Current - Graduate Instructor
Utah State University- Psychology Department
Primary instructor for Psychology 3660: Educational Psychology. Responsibilities: Teach applied concepts of educational psychology to undergraduate education majors attending school at USU. Create course material, lesson plans, and implement weekly lessons. Maintain Blackboard, Canvas and assign grades for current students and assist students as needed.

8/ 2009 – 5/2010 - Graduate Teaching Assistant
Utah State University- Psychology Department
Lab instructor for Psych 3660: Educational Psychology. Responsibilities: Provide all needed assistance to Educational Psychology Course Instructor, prepare lab materials and create syllabus and lab lessons. Teach four weekly lab sections to undergraduate education majors. Assist with grading on Blackboard and assist students with course issues as needed.

2/2008 – 7/2009 - Graduate Administrative Assistant
Northern Arizona University-Educational Psychology department-North Valley
Work in Master’s Community Counseling program. Responsibilities: Provide all needed assistance to the program coordinator, research, create and maintain schedule of courses, assist adjunct faculty, aid current students as needed, maintain student files, set up practicum clinic. Promote the program and provide information to prospective students. Work collaboratively with the Flagstaff personnel.

6/2000-7/2002 - Elementary School Teacher
Creighton School District- Excelencia Elementary, Phoenix, AZ
Responsibilities: Taught diverse students in the fourth grade. Developed lessons and lesson plans consistent with AZ state standards; responsible for maintaining classroom management and provided after school tutoring as needed. Collaborated with school staff and grade level team members in training and creation of lessons. Provided instruction as part of the school’s
dual language program. Provided instruction as part of the English immersion program when the dual language program became obsolete, and worked with English Language Learners. Built collaborative relationships with parents in order to support student learning and encourage parent involvement. Fulfilled all other duties required of teachers (attended meetings, trainings, etc.)

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

2012-2014- Utah State University Understanding Experiences of Female Survivors of Domestic Violence: Stories of Strength, Resilience, and Mechanisms that Assist in Leaving Violent Relationships, Logan, Utah
  ▪ Primary Investigator: Annel Cordero, M.A.
  ▪ Dissertation Topic

2009-2012- Utah State University Problem Solving Communication and Interpersonal Power among Latino Adolescent Couples, Logan, Utah
  ▪ Co-Investigator
  ▪ Thesis Equivalent Topic
  ▪ Primary Investigator: Renee V. Galliher, Ph.D.

2008-2009- Northern Arizona University Student Leadership Development within Psychological Associations, Phoenix, AZ
  ▪ Co-Investigator
  ▪ Primary Investigator: Y. Evie Garcia, Ph.D.

2007-2008- Northern Arizona University Bilingual Services Shortage and Training Programs’ Efforts to Mitigate the Shortage Project, Phoenix, AZ
  ▪ Co-Investigator
  ▪ Primary Investigator: Y. Evie Garcia, Ph.D.

August 2007-May 2008- New Beginnings Program (ASU) an empirically-based program for divorced parents to help their children adjust to divorce
  ▪ Group Co-Facilitator
  ▪ Data Collection
  ▪ Supervisor: Kathryn Wilcox Doyle, Ph.D.

PUBLICATIONS


MANUSCRIPTS IN PROGRESS


PRESENTATIONS


Garcia, Y. E., Berens, V. & Cordero, A. (2008, March) Meeting the need for bilingual counselors. A Presentation at the annual conference of the American Counseling Association, Honolulu, HI.


Cordero, A. (2007, February) Treating survivors of domestic violence. In B. Brown (Chair), In her shoes-walking through the experience: Research into practice. Conducted at the workshop for Arizona Psychological Association, Phoenix, AZ.

Cordero, A. & MacRey, V. (2006, September) Building a safe place: Empowering staff to support families experiencing violence and taking steps to help build a “safe place. Workshop for Southwest Human Development Agency Seminar


Esparza, A. (2004, October) Healthy relationships. Workshop for Southwest Human Development Infant Toddler Program, Phoenix, AZ.

SERVICE TO THE PROFESSION

Reviewer-Conference submissions:
2010 Reviewer, National Latino/a Psychological Association
2008 Reviewer, Arizona Psychological Association-Academic and Student Affairs Committee
2008 Reviewer, National Latino/a Psychological Association
2007 Reviewer, Arizona Psychological Association-Academic and Student Affairs Committee

Division 45 Hospitality Suite Scheduler-Host, American Psychological Association
April 2008- 2011
• Assisted the Suite Coordinator of Division 45’s suite for American Psychological Association’s Convention in Boston, Massachusetts
• Contacted and worked collaboratively with various associations and individuals to create suite schedule
• Designed a schedule of meetings for the suite
• Host at suite meetings
• Coordinated the Division 45 suite Social Hour and Open House
• Worked collaboratively with other hosts to coordinate and maintain daily meeting
• Worked collaboratively with Division 35, 44, NLPA, and other associations

State Advocacy Coordinator, American Psychological Association for Graduate Students (APAGS) August 2008-November 2009
• Inform psychology graduate student in the state about issues relevant to the field of
psychology and graduate students in particular

- Ensuring reciprocal communication between graduate students and APAGS/APA
- Provide information about legislative issues affecting the field of psychology and the clients served
- Acting as a liaison between graduate students in the state and the State or Provincial psychological association.
- Work with Campus Representatives (CRs) to recruit student members for APAGS and State associations
- Recruit CRs for state universities

**Division 45 Hospitality Suite Host, American Psychological Association**
August, 2007

- Hosted Division 45’s suite for American Psychological Association’s Convention in San Francisco, California
- Coordinated the Division 45 suite Social Hour and Open House
- Worked collaboratively with hosts to coordinate and maintain daily meeting schedules
- Worked collaboratively with Division 35 (section 1) to promote a fundraising event
- Worked collaboratively with Division 35, 44, NLPA, and other associations to disseminate association information

**Campus Representative, American Psychological Association for Graduate Students (APAGS)** (January 2007-November 2008)

- Inform NAU students from Psychology and Educational Psychology departments about current events and issues
- Respond to and disseminate Legislative Action alerts as needed
- Provide a monthly report about campus activity to APAGS State Advocacy Coordinator
- Promote APA and recruit members for APAGS

**Campus Representative, Arizona Psychological Association (AzPA)** (January 2007-November 2008)

- Attend monthly AzPA Academic & Student Affairs meetings
- Keep NAU students informed about current events and issues
- Coordinated nominations, evaluation, and announcement of Faculty of The Year Award

**Faculty Search Committee member, Northern Arizona University** (January 2007-March 2007)

- Reviewed files
- Matrixed Candidates
- Interviewed Candidates
- Developed list rank ordering candidates for the Dean of the College of Education

**Membership Data Base Coordinator, Arizona Counseling Association (AzCA)** (October 2003-March 2004)

- Maintained data base
- Collaborated with AzCA president, president elect and treasurer on a variety of issues

**Professional Development Committee Member, Arizona Counseling Association (AzCA)** (Summer & Fall 2003)
- Collaborated with the committee Chair and other members to coordinate conferences and professional training opportunities for members of AzCA

**SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY**

2005-2007 - **Team Coordinator**  
Walk Against Domestic Violence, Phoenix, AZ  
- Raise funds  
- Raise awareness about domestic violence  
- Coordinate a team

9/2003 – 1/ 2004 - **Group Leader**  
Free Arts of Arizona, Phoenix, AZ  
- Facilitated small groups  
- Provided Art Therapy for children of diverse backgrounds living in homeless shelter  
- Participated in required training  
- Created therapeutic activities for homeless children

2000-2002 - **After School Tutor**  
Excelencia Elementary Phoenix, AZ  
- Provided tutoring for students experiencing academic difficulties

**AWARDS:**

- P.E.O. (Philanthropic Educational Organization), Scholar Award (2012-2013) - $15,000  
- Graduate Student Senate Travel Award (2010, 2011) - $300 each  
- Department of Psychology Student Travel Award (2010,2011)-$300 each  
- A. Toy Caldwell-Colbert Distinguished Student Service Award- APA Division 45(2009) - $500  
- National Latino Psychological Association Travel Award & Scholarship (2010, 2012) - $200  
- Olson Family Foundation Scholarship - $10,000  
- Psi Alpha Omega Honor Society  
- Excellence in Campus Leadership Award-APAGS  
- Hispanic Scholarship Fund Recipient (2002, 2003) - $1,500 each  
- Teacher Appreciation  
- Golden Key International Honor Society  
- NAU Dean’s List- (Junior and Senior Year)  
- NAU Honor Award  
- Recipient of various Scholarships (1998-2000) - $500.00 - $3,000

**PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS**

- American Psychological Association  
  - APAGS  
  - Division 45: Society for the Psychological Study of Ethnic Minority Affairs  
- National Latino Psychological Association  
- Society for Research on Adolescence  
- Golden Key International Honor Society  
- Psi Alpha Omega National Honor Society