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Beyond Survival: Reclaiming Self After Leaving an Abusive Male Partner

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La recherche sur le processus de quitter un conjoint violent a porté jusqu'à maintenant sur la survie en situation de violence et sur la crise générée par le départ. Il existe peu de données sur le vécu des femmes qui ont quitté des conjoints violents et qui ne sont pas retournées. Dans les études théoriques axées sur une approche féministe qui portent sur les femmes ayant quitté leurs partenaires violents, les chercheurs ont découvert le processus sociopsychologique fondamental de *recouvrer son sens d'identité*. Au cours de cette démarche, les femmes passent par quatre étapes : résister à la violence, se libérer, ne pas retourner et poursuivre leur vie. Cet article porte sur la dernière étape, celle de *poursuivre une vie*, phase au cours de laquelle les femmes dépassent le stade de concevoir leur vie en tant que survivantes de violence conjugale et vivent le processus de *comprendre ce qui leur est arrivé, remettre cette expérience à la bonne place, amorcer de nouvelles relations* et *se doter d'une nouvelle image*. Les résultats approfondissent nos connaissances du processus de rupture en identifiant comment l'expérience de la violence et le processus de survie sont déplacés hors du centre de la vie intrapsychique, interpersonnelle et sociale d'une femme. Des questions sont soulevées à l'intention du personnel infirmier et d'autres professionnels de la santé à savoir comment ceux-ci peuvent éviter de revictimiser les femmes dont le cheminement les a amené à *dépasser* cette expérience.

Research on the process of leaving an abusive male partner has focused on surviving abuse and the crisis of leaving. Little is known about the experience of women who have left abusive male partners and not gone back. In this feminist grounded theory study of women leaving abusive partners, the researchers discovered the basic social-psychological process of *reclaiming self* in which women voyaged through 4 stages: counteracting abuse, breaking free, not going back, and moving on. The focus of this paper is the last stage, *moving on*, during which women move beyond framing their lives as survivors of an abusive relationship through the processes of *figuring it out, putting it in its rightful place, launching new relationships*, and *taking on a new image*. The findings extend our knowledge of the leaving process by delineating the ways in which the abuse experience and the survival process are displaced as the centre of the woman's intra-psychic, interpersonal, and social existence. Questions are raised about how nurses and other health professionals can avoid revictimizing women who have *moved on*.

Despite the prevalence of woman abuse by men, little is known about the ways in which surviving an abusive conjugal relationship affects women over time, or the implications of this legacy for nursing practice

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with women. In this feminist grounded theory study of the process of leaving an abusive male partner, *reclaiming self* emerged as the central social-psychological process. *Reclaiming self*, a process of reinstating self in the larger social context, has four stages: counteracting abuse, breaking free (Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995), not going back (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999), and moving on. The focus of this discussion will be the last stage, *moving on*, and its implications for practice with women who have been abused by their male partner. Women who are *moving on* are past the immediate crisis of leaving, and over time have achieved some stability, establishing a new life separate from the abuser. In this stage, they are able to devote their energy to reflecting on the past and claiming a future in which they are no longer defined by either the abuse or the survival experience. For these women, *reclaiming self* is a process grounded not only in intra-psychic work but also in reconstructing day-to-day activities, interpersonal relationships, and social connections.

Background

One in four Canadian women experiences violence at the hands of a conjugal partner (Statistics Canada, 1993). Our work with women who have left abusive partners indicates that leaving is a process, not a singular act. Research on the process of surviving or leaving has focused principally on preparing to leave and the crisis of leaving (Fiene, 1995; Landenburger, 1989, 1993, 1998; Mills, 1985; Ulrich, 1991, 1993). Campbell, Rose, Kub, and Nedd (1998) recently delineated women's resourcefulness in achieving nonviolence in previously violent relationships. Studies that have included the post-leaving period have focused on the concepts of recovery (Kearney, 1999; Landenburger, 1989, 1998; Taylor, 1998) and healing (Farrell, 1996). Landenburger (1989, 1998) has developed a model of entrapment in and recovery from an abusive relationship, identifying three subprocesses of the recovery stage: struggling for survival, grieving, and searching for meaning. Farrell's phenomenological study of healing following an abusive relationship identified four themes: flexibility, awakening, relationship, and empowerment. Healing, according to Farrell, consists of reconnecting the fragments of the self by putting the abuse experience into perspective and developing a sense of wholeness. Kearney applied her substantive theory of recovery from trauma and illness to the literature on leaving an abusive relationship. Recovery is conceptualized as reconciling by "reassembling the shattered self" (p. 137). Healing and recovery are seen to start while the woman is still in the relationship and continue through the process of leaving into the post-leaving period.

In contrast, Taylor (1998), in an ethnographic study of resilience and recovery among African-American women survivors of domestic violence, focused on what the women did to thrive and move past mere survival. She identified strategies used by the women as a means of resistance during recovery: telling our business, reclaiming ourselves, renewing the spirit, building a new foundation, knowing my place, forgiving, being your own woman, beating back the barriers, and looking forward. These findings extend previous understandings of leaving but are specific to African-American survivors in that the women's actions relate not only to moving beyond the violence but also to addressing racial oppression. We need similar knowledge regarding other populations. Given the prevalence of woman abuse, it is imperative that we understand how women move beyond framing their lives as survivors of an abusive relationship, and having their lives framed that way by others, in order to increase our knowledge of the whole process of leaving and inform our practice with women who have experienced abuse in the past.

Research Design

We selected grounded theory from a feminist perspective (Wuest, 1995) as the method for exploring the process of leaving abusive relationships among women living in small towns and rural communities in eastern Canada. Grounded theory (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), as a method for discovering social process within social structure, was well suited to exploration of the process of leaving. Feminist perspectives on violence have eroded the primacy of individual and interpersonal explanations of violence in relationships, looking instead to gender and power issues in the larger social context (Varcoe, 1996). A feminist perspective in this grounded theory study ensured that the women's subjective experiences would be examined in social context.

Data Collection and Analysis

In grounded theory, data collection and analysis proceed simultaneously and participants are selected not on the basis of their representativeness but because the investigator believes them to be a source of knowledge of the domain being explored or for a specific analytic goal (Glaser, 1978; Sandelowski, 1995).

Lay and professional helpers such as transition-house workers and community-health nurses gave explanatory letters with stamped response cards to potential participants — women who they knew had

left abusive relationships. Respondents were telephoned, their questions answered, and arrangements made for an interview at a mutually agreeable location. Data were collected through unstructured audiotaped interviews with 15 Caucasian women who originated and currently lived in small towns and geographically isolated areas in eastern Canada. The women ranged in age from their late teens to mid-50s; were either employed, students, or receiving social assistance; and had educational levels ranging from elementary school to university degree. About half of the women had accessed women's shelters at some point in the leaving process. None of the women had access to support groups and very few had sought professional counselling.

Each participant gave her informed consent and the investigators made it clear that she was free to stop the interview or refuse to answer any question. Initially, the women were asked to talk about how they had left the relationship. Invariably, they spoke not only about the abusive relationship and leaving, but also about what they and their lives had become since they had left. For the women in this study, the process of leaving and *reclaiming self* eventually included moving the experience of abuse and survival away from a position of primacy in their lives, not only intra-psychically but also interpersonally and socially.

Interviews were transcribed with all identifying data removed and the tapes were returned to the participants or erased. As concepts were identified in data analysis, information to illuminate the theoretical properties of emerging concepts was sought by theoretical sampling of data from repeat interviews and interviews with new participants, as well as focus-group data from a study to explore sociocultural perspectives on woman abuse (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1997). Theoretical coding was used to clarify relationships between concepts and to facilitate the development of a theoretical framework (Glaser, 1978). In repeat interviews, the emerging theory was shared with the participant for discussion and refinement.

Findings

Reclaiming self was the central social-psychological process that emerged in this study with women who had left abusive relationships. *Counteracting abuse,* the initial stage of this process, reflects survivor resiliency from the onset of abuse as women learn strategies for minimizing abuse and building their own strengths despite sustaining painful losses (Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995). *Breaking free,* the stage of disengagement, is tortuous and iterative as survivors tentatively draw

on their increased competence, test different exits, and discover the unpredictable and dangerous consequences of leaving the relationship. *Not going back* is the stage in which the women attempt to establish and protect physical and emotional territory separate from the abuser despite increased risk from escalating violence or abuse (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999). In this stage, women garner control using the strategies of harnessing the system for assistance, setting limits on partners and helpers, formulating a plan for the future, and coming to terms with living in significant danger from partner harassment. At the same time, survivors face the challenges of getting established in a new location separate from the abuser by negotiating for and reclaiming belongings, taking ownership of finances, resuming normal day-to-day activities, and settling their children in new neighbourhoods. Throughout this period, women engage in relentless justifying, a process of feeling compelled to explain their situation not only to the outside world but also to themselves. The work of *not going back* is demanding, made more so by emotional pain and fatigue and the need to put children's needs first.

Moving on is the fourth stage in the process of *reclaiming self.* Survivors are now relocated and are no longer consumed by the practical issues of claiming their own territory. Although memories of the abuse, intense fear, pain, and anxiety occasionally resurface, the woman no longer feels at risk. This relative stability allows her time and energy for purposeful reflecting on the past, engaging in other aspects of her life, and investing in her future. *Moving on,* then, consists of shedding the identities of "victim" and "survivor" and of *figuring it out, putting it in its rightful place, launching new relationships,* and *taking on a new image.* These processes occur simultaneously, each providing a system of checks and balances for the others. The *moving on* stage takes place over several years.

Figuring It Out

Figuring it out is the process of searching for reasons why the abuse happened and why the woman remained in the relationship as long as she did. It is similar to what Landenburger (1989) calls "searching for meaning." During the *not going back* stage, survivors *reviewed and replayed* the abuse as they were called upon to justify and defend their decisions and to measure up to established criteria for accessing services for abused women (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999). Reviewing and replaying their past heightened their pain, isolation, and sorrow for the loss of innocence, dreams, hopes, material possessions, and a sense of

self. *Figuring it out* is a more conscious and proactive process, often driven by a desire to prevent abuse from happening in their future relationships and, perhaps more importantly, to prevent it from happening in the relationships of their sons and daughters. The complexity of factors which might have contributed to their abuse is explored and expanded by women through the process of *figuring it out.*

Much of the focus in *figuring it out* is assignment of blame. Survivors felt that they were socially called upon to clarify the blame and to account for what they did wrong. Few of the women accessed professional help at this stage of *reclaiming self.* Rather, they reflected, talked, kept journals, drove around in their cars thinking, and, over time, observed the abuser interact in new relationships. The women reviewed turning points in the leaving process, re-examining which encouragements and instrumental supports had been helpful and which had not. Rarely in the process of *figuring it out* did they consider the impact of social conditions, societal and cultural norms, or family traditions.

Their questioning at first focused on self-blame, beginning with "Why me? What's wrong with me?" Many women compared themselves with women in good relationships: "It's not fair. Why do these things happen to me?" They questioned what made them vulnerable by examining personal shortcomings. Was it their tendency to be dependent on men, their attraction to "his type," their need to be attached, or their youthful naivety, which resulted in "false love"? Some women blamed themselves for "hanging around places I shouldn't." Some ruefully acknowledged their continuing love for the abuser, even after being out of the relationship for a long time. This reflective process caused some women to wonder if they were capable of having a "normal relationship" with a man.

In the *moving on* stage most of the women had stopped believing they could have altered the relationship by being a "better" wife. Socially, however, they continued to get subtle messages that had they been more "obedient" or "self-sacrificing" or "caring" they could have made the relationship work. They spoke of acquiring the skills needed to "tune out" these messages in order to get on with their lives. Friends of the women in the present study had sometimes been more sympathetic towards the abuser in his plight and only after many months or years began to acknowledge evidence of his unwillingness to take responsibility for his behaviour that put others at risk. When friends or family members validated her perspective of the abuser, the survivor was less inclined to blame herself:

I don't care what people think of me. I have been called everything, including a whore, because I broke up this happy home. But the thing is, it's going on 3 years and people are starting to wake up. And they're coming back and talking to me and realizing it was not as good as what they thought.

The women asked themselves, "Why did I stay so long?" Some attributed the length of time they stayed to personal and social expectations — "You don't just walk out" — or to the absence of resources, such as money or a place to stay. Others linked staying in the relationship to their spiritual beliefs: "God will never give you more than you can handle." But most identified personal deficiencies such as an inability to face failure in the relationship, pity for the abusive partner, or insufficient strength to stay away, or they bought into his excuses: "I was brainwashed," "I loved him," "He was a bad habit." They noted their difficulty in naming what was happening to them as abuse, the paucity of information on norms for everyday relationships, and the difficulty of talking to anyone about what was happening. A final factor identified — perhaps the most significant one — was the enduring hope that the partner would change if she just kept trying to make him understand.

The women also tried to determine what was wrong with their partner, considering factors such as his unstable family background, substance abuse, or difficulty holding down jobs. Many noted their abuser's manipulative behaviour or his inability to deal with anger or frustration. Several said he was "strange" or "did weird stuff," alluding to his being twisted or evil in other ways, but remarked on the absence of early cues that might have warned them of the potential for abuse. Some were angry that people in the community who had knowledge of his previous abusive behaviour failed to give any warning. With frustration, survivors frequently observed that their abuser refused to accept responsibility for his actions and that society had no expectations of abusers to do so.

As the women considered the character of their relationship, they asked whether their own role, particularly early in the relationship, might have contributed to the abuse: "I let him walk over me," "I played mother." Some commented on the quality of the relationship: "There just wasn't enough caring." Some women were confident about their conduct in the relationship:

I know that it wasn't my fault because I never did anything. I never ran around. I didn't go out and drink and get stupid or any of those things. So there was no reason. It's different if you have a reason. Then maybe

> *you can accept some of the guilt or you think maybe it is my fault, but I knew it wasn't my fault.*

Others viewed themselves as having some responsibility:

> *The majority of our friends were dead against me. I have told them, "I am not going to sit back and blame him for everything. It's just as much my fault, because maybe I could have done things differently too." But he still blames me solely.*

As they considered the relationship, attribution of blame to themselves lessened when they considered broader social factors. Participants noted the absence of social norms around what is normal in a relationship and the assumption that parents teach children about relationships: "We leave so much to assuming that parents did a good job." Women who had received premarital counselling were angry that spousal abuse had not been a topic for discussion, given its prevalence. This was particularly true of women whose family of origin included no exposure to abusive behaviour or discussion about how to handle violence in a relationship. In the present study, survivors eventually came to an understanding that there was no clear reason for the abuse, no one to blame, and finally recognized that they could live with not knowing why abuse happened.

Putting It in Its Rightful Place

"Putting it in its rightful place" is how one woman described the process of no longer allowing the abuse experience to define her existence. The women had various ways of framing this process. "I just want that person [the woman who was abused] to be dead," "I'm filing it for future reference," "I broke that habit, and the dreams that I had when I was younger have come back but they are modified."

The women spoke of being repeatedly told by family members, friends, and helpers to not dwell on the abusive experience and to "forgive and forget," advice that they found untenable. In contrast to the women in Taylor's (1998) study, the participants in this study did not consider forgiveness central to healing. Some were frustrated with a community that expected them to forgive but did not expect their abusers to show remorse. Moreover, many felt lied to by helpers such as members of the clergy who had made such comments as "You'll remember the good and not the bad." They were angered by the assumption that it was possible to forget such a significant experience. In fact, the participants, not unlike war veterans, said that it was vital the experience not be forgotten, so that it would not be repeated. They

said that despite *putting the abuse in its rightful place,* the painful memories resurfaced, even many years later. The women graphically and eerily described such feelings as "his eyes on me," "pressure on the wrists," and "his presence in a room."

Despite the fact that the abuse is not forgotten, it does become displaced as the centre of the woman's existence. It is put in the context of other life events and new challenges such as taking a new job, dealing with a teenager in trouble with the law, becoming a mother, or finding a lump in the breast. The women spoke of discovering that some events, such as the death of a baby or the loss of a loved one to cancer, are worse than abuse. One woman spoke of finding her new partner in bed with another woman. This was worse than the abuse she had endured because they had a loving relationship and she had finally allowed herself to trust a man again.

As the women stopped defining themselves in terms of the abusive experience, they incorporated the abuse as part of their past and began to recognize the positive consequences of the relationship. Some, especially those with children, developed a careful co-existence with the ex-partner, particularly when he and his extended family lived in close proximity. Although this co-existence may be co-operative in some ways, it is most often awkward and extremely difficult. The women confessed to taking pleasure in hearing about misery or misfortune befalling their ex-partner. Over time, the survivors sensed a softening of their anger towards family and friends who had failed them or put them at greater risk. However, they were less forgiving of institutions that had repeatedly hampered their leaving process with red tape, inaction, and misinformation. After all, they reasoned, helping was "their job." As the women put abuse *in its rightful place,* they were able to reinvest in their futures.

Launching New Relationships

Launching new relationships takes place within a social environment where there is a pervasive expectation that women be partnered. The participants indicated that they felt uncomfortable without a partner at social or sporting events, or even eating out. Yet they were ambivalent about launching new relationships. They wanted to believe they were capable of having a loving relationship but feared that history would repeat itself. Several women had become involved with men for support and refuge during the stages of *counteracting abuse* or *breaking free,* but becoming involved during *moving on* was a more considered process. The participants identified different levels of commitment in

relationships, ranging from "just sex" to real involvement. All found it important to give themselves time and to trust their gut feelings about readiness for exposure to environments with the potential for initiating new relationships. One woman recalled, "I went through a relationship but I ended it because I am not ready. I don't feel anything." The women distinguished between *being able to* and *wanting to* engage in a new relationship. A woman who had been out of her relationship for 16 years said, "I could do it now...but I don't want to." Another described relationships as "stepping stones...one building on the next."

The women spoke of their vigilance in new relationships as "being on guard," "reading all the signs," and "surveying the whole scene." None of the women wanted to find themselves in another abusive relationship but the constant surveillance was nerve-racking and exhausting. Vigilance included setting criteria for themselves, their partner, and the relationship. The women made protective rules such as "I won't marry again," "I'll keep control of my own money," and "I'll always have an exit."

> *I am absolutely sure that I would never...I could date a man as long as we could see each other once or twice on the weekend...for 20 years, fine. But he is staying in his place and I am staying in mine. I am never letting anybody take that away from me again!*

The women believed that they could not change men: "If your man is that way when you get him, he's that way when you leave him." This belief led them to check out potential mates using their newly established criteria. They watched for warning signs such as rage, name-calling, surveillance, antagonistic behaviour, and drinking or taking drugs. The women looked for men with whom they felt comfortable talking and problem-solving, who showed understanding with regard to their abusive experiences, and who offered affection and support in response to unreasonable behaviour on their own part. It was important that potential partners be able to withstand exhaustive testing:

> *I'd call him at three or four o'clock in the morning just to see what kind of reaction I'd get. When we started living together, I'd make noise just to see if he'd get up and start screaming and yelling at me or call me names or something like that. I just had to be sure that he wasn't really putting on an act for me.*

One woman said, "If he doesn't measure up, he's out."

Women defined what they would accept in a relationship, particularly with respect to trust, problem-solving, fighting, and amount of personal investment:

> *If he does something I don't like, I don't keep quiet about it just to keep peace in the house. I tell him that I don't like it, that I don't want it to happen again. You know, it's nothing major but your attitude is totally different.*

They described a reluctance to fully trust any partner again, while acknowledging that trust was essential in the kind of relationship they wanted. They looked for evidence that it would be at least a 50/50 partnership, with some women being adamant that they come first in any relationship. The women wanted to be able to discuss concerns about their new relationships with trusted friends and family members; helpful family members supported their judgement and their decision to partner. Participants did not expect their relationships to be without conflict, but they wanted to know that "fighting in the relationship will be fair." They wanted to be able to resolve problems in a civil manner and to believe that both partners could speak their minds and confront each other without feeling threatened. Over time, the women said they began to relax their criteria, acknowledging that "while this man may not be perfect, the relationship works and feels good."

Taking on a New Image

Taking on a new image is the process of leaving behind the image of abused woman or survivor and taking pride in the person one has become. When the women in the present study were being abused, they relinquished parts of themselves, assuming aspects of the abuser's image. Although in the process of *counteracting abuse* they fortified themselves in ways that eventually allowed them to *break free* and *not go back*, they lacked the freedom, energy, and time to forge a new image:

> *You left a man but you haven't left that life. You haven't left the thinking. It's not so much the life, it's what they create you to be.*

Moreover, in order to qualify for help needed to survive, women were forced to demonstrate over and over again how they met the criteria of the "abused woman" established by various agencies. This public framing of the woman as victim or survivor limited her options and put her in a box. In *moving on*, women begin to take stock of themselves, recognizing ways in which they are now different. They have let go of shattered dreams and are acutely aware that their views of the world have changed. Material possessions, the loss of which was central in the process of *not going back*, are less important; opportunities do not depend on their attaining and keeping them. With these discoveries, the woman begins to enjoy the person she has become.

The women in this study spoke of finally being able to enjoy spending time at home, of taking pleasure in the more mundane aspects of daily life in the home and in the community:

> *I'm really happy now. I'm so much more content.... I'm home all the time. You know, I was never home then. No matter what we did to the house, I was never there to enjoy it because I hated to be there.*

One woman said, "The woman who was abused is not who you are now."

They expressed curiosity about the potential of the person they had become. They spoke of a new awareness of others' emotional pain and their own enhanced potential for helping them:

> *I am more aware...I can see in other people when they are hurting...you can almost reach out and help somebody who was in the same situation that you were in, because you can sense it.*

The women were aware of their personal power and control. Having conquered abuse, most reported feeling stronger, braver, more capable of caring for themselves, and more secure in who they were. A woman who had experienced censure by friends and acquaintances said:

> *Now, I can walk down Front Street and anybody that knows, knows of me, they could turn around and say whatever they wanted to me now and it's, like, I don't care, say what you want, I know who I am.*

Dreams such as having a career, returning to school, or owning a home began to seem possible: "There's a future for me now. I see a future now."

Women with children spoke of becoming better parents. They wanted to be seen as "together," not as survivor or victim, and purposefully exhibited that side of themselves. These new self-perceptions were reinforced by employers, co-workers, friends, and family members: "I've seen such a difference in you," "You look great," "It was a good move."

Implications

These findings related to *moving on* complete the in-depth description of the theory of *reclaiming self* begun in descriptions of the stages of *counteracting abuse, breaking free* (Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995) and *not going back* (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999). This theory provides an inclusive framework to assist nurses and others in their work with women who are in any one of the stages. It also may help women who are in the process of leaving to frame their progress and make sense of the

experience. Although the sample used was a homogeneous group of Caucasian women living in eastern Canadian small-town and rural settings, the theory may be applicable to women of various races, ethnic groups, social classes, or life circumstances. By testing its usefulness with diverse women, clinicians may be able to further develop or modify the theory. Researchers may be able to extend the theory by using constant comparative analysis with other populations. Campbell et al. (1998) found that some women were able to change their lives and create a safe social environment for themselves without leaving the abusive partner. One area for future research would be to determine whether such women also go through a process of *moving on.*

The findings of this study have changed our thinking with regard to the term *survivor.* The literature on domestic violence reveals a shift in descriptive terminology concerning women who have been abused, from *victim* to *survivor* (Campbell, 1986, 1992; Hoff, 1990). In our previous writings and presentations, we carefully used the term *survivor,* believing that it emphasized women's strengths and capacities. Our analysis of the process of *moving on* has shown us that this label still gives primacy to abuse in women's lives, even though women in this stage are clearly *taking on a new image* and no longer see abuse or the survival experience as the centre of their existence. Hence, although *survivor* may be an empowering term for women in the stages of *counteracting abuse, breaking free,* and *not going back,* we believe it has the potential to disempower women who are in the process of *moving on.* Any label applied by socially defined experts has the potential to take away from the woman's redefinition of herself, and we need to ask ourselves who the label serves. Clinicians can more usefully build on the woman's efforts to take on a new image by using language that resonates with her orientation towards the future.

These findings also raise important issues for other health professionals who work with women. Given that one in four women in Canada is abused by her conjugal partner, many women who seek health services are in some stage of the leaving process. Abuse screening by nurses and other health professionals can help to identify women in all stages of the process of *reclaiming self,* providing opportunities both to offer assistance and to revictimize by making assumptions and inappropriately labelling women as survivors or victims. Campbell (1998) calls for the health-care system to be an empowerment zone for battered women and their children. To achieve this goal, assessment would include determining a woman's stage in the leaving process and tailoring assistance to needs associated with that stage. Additional work

is required to design and test stage-specific clinical interventions based on this theoretical framework.

The findings concerning *moving on* offer direction for public and professional education concerning the leaving process. Women who enter the health-care system while in the *moving on* stage will most likely be seeking help for non-violence-related issues, yet their health-care providers need to be cognizant of their present issues in *moving on.* The fact that data that led to the conceptualization of moving on originated with women who were asked to talk about the process of leaving suggests that, for women, the process is not complete until they have been able to reposition abuse so that it no longer defines their life experience publicly. Therefore, societal understanding of the process of leaving needs to reflect this important stage.

A core issue for women in the process of *figuring it out* was assignment of blame. Most focused on their own shortcomings and those of their partner as reasons for the abuse, a practice encouraged socially and professionally and consistent with a North American value system of taking responsibility for events. Women should be encouraged to move beyond individual responsibility, to consider family and societal influences that support the development of abuse. This is more likely to happen in an environment in which the public understands abuse as socially constructed and does not exert pressure on women to accept an unreasonable amount of responsibility.

Women also may benefit from being encouraged to remember, reflect on, and learn from the experience, as opposed to being pressured to forget. Lay and professional helpers should heed women's construction of *putting it in its rightful place.* As women move on, they may accumulate losses that overshadow the abuse experience. Nurses and other health professionals must be careful not to give primacy to abuse when, in fact, other life experiences may have become more central to the woman's health. They must nevertheless acknowledge abuse as a significant part of her past, be prepared for its resurfacing, and offer validation and anticipatory guidance.

Finally, all women who have left abusive relationships require confirmation of their strengths and their growth in order to foster the development of their *new image.* Our findings reinforce the position that revictimization by individuals, families, professional helpers, and institutions happens over and over again to women in all stages of the process of leaving. Often, nurses and other health professionals who encounter women in the process of reclaiming self have little knowledge of domestic violence and little experience in offering constructive

assistance to women who have been abused by their partner. While such helpers may not know what intervention may be most helpful, at the very least they must take steps to do no harm and reinforce women's strengths and security.

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