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IN HER OWN WORDS:

A FOCUS GROUP STUDY OF RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS IN INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

RFP Number 200-93-0696-I 5

Submitted to:

National Center for injury Prevention and Control
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Submitted by:

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Atlanta, Georgia 30329

February 4, 1997

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A Focus Group Study of Risk and Protective Factors in Intimate Partner Violence

on behalf of the

National Center for Injury Prevention and Control
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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Acknowledgments'

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In Her Own Words is an important study in its capacity to change the world view of those touched by it. The stories and events described by these formerly abused women-experiences of triumph, defeat, shame, resoluteness-put a face on the statistics reported in quantitative studies. These data make personal and real the nightly news reports about intimate partner violence. The study team extends our heart-felt gratitude to the 168 women who participated in the focus groups--opening old emotional wounds and sharing private anguish in order to use their experiences to help other women and families.

There are many to thank in seeing this study completed. Nicole Lezin, as the original study project manager, applied her considerable talents to the early phases of this work, and was crucial to the application of the Transtheoretical Model to Intimate Partner Violence. Her contribution to conceptualizing and communicating the findings is especially appreciated. The focus group moderators, Barbara Hairston and Martha Zipper, were expert at eliciting the needed data in the focus groups while respecting the privacy of the participants. Kira Sue Chitwood and Nicola Dawkins were key contributors to this study, and were especially instrumental in the coding, analysis, interpretation, and writing processes. Both brought their disciplinary expertise and perspective to the study, helping to assure that the voices of these women will be heard. Lela Baughman, Macro Senior Manager, kept a steady eye on the progress, complexities, and implications of this project. In addition, Jodi Prochaska and Natasha Thompson were of great assistance in the recruitment and implementation of the focus groups. While a number of Macro staff contributed to the completion of this report, Antoinette Buchanan is especially thanked for her good spirit.

The Macro study team applauds the National Center of Injury Prevention and Control of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for providing leadership for national violence prevention policy and intervention efforts. The vision and research agenda of this group of scientists makes our Nation's families safer. The study's Technical Monitors, Drs. Lynn Short, Pamela McMahon, and Gene Shelley of the CDC's Family and Intimate Partner Violence Team in the Division of Violence Prevention, provided stewardship of this research and foresight in crafting a meaningful research agenda. They are guides of a national research effort that looks not only at the characteristics of the battered and batterers, but explores the nature of complex interpersonal and familial relationships and the social institutions that can help them.

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February 1997

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Her Own Words

A Focus Group Study of Risk and Protective Factors in Intimate Partner Violence

Public health's focus on intimate partner violence reflects a growing awareness of how violence undermines the human spirit and creates an endless spiral of psychological distress, physical pain, injury, and sometimes death. The opportunity, however, for preventing the occurrence or escalation of intimate partner violence offers tremendous payoffs for abused women, their partners, and their children. Preventing intimate partner violence is a monumental challenge involving individual and societal views of gender-roles, cultural beliefs and values, parenting practices, religious convictions, and the organization and response of myriad social institutions. To help meet this challenge, this study presents the views of 168 women who endured and ultimately survived abusive intimate relationships.

> ***And then you* let one little *thing go, you think, 'you know everybody is human.' You know, don't make a big deal out of it. You gradually stop kind* of *checking into the reality* areas *of* your *life that used to keep you balanced, used to keep you kind* of *'What's going on here?' And* so *it's* systematic. */t's* a *little bit at a time and* then *by the time you get something is wrong, you're in it so deep that you can't get out...***
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman, Georgia***

I. THE PROBLEM

To most outside observers, the behavior of abused women seems inexplicable. Belittled, controlled, and assaulted, they react not with the indignation and outrage we expect, but with mystifying acceptance. From our vantage point outside the relationship, we are perplexed by the abused woman's resignation to her fate, by the absence of anger, the seeming tolerance of intolerable affronts. Often, our reaction to the plight of a woman trapped in an abusive relationship is some version of "Why does she stay?"

Intimate partner violence is a battle for **power and control** over another person. The weapons of violence-epithets, threats, slaps, punches, kicks, rape-are the means to capture the prize of control, not ends in themselves. The abused woman's sense of **self worth** becomes a central element of the struggle. Whether the abused woman's self esteem is already low before she meets her abuser or whether he systematically erodes whatever self esteem she has, she is left without the protective layer of self worth that sends up red flags of warning. "*By the time he hit me,*" abused women report, "*I thought I deserved it.*"

Research over the past decade has shed a great deal of light on the dynamics of abusive relationships. At the same time, violence between intimate partners has been the subject of increased media attention, both from news organizations and the entertainment industry. However, preventive interventions remain scarce in comparison to the growth in shelters and other supports that women can turn to as they seek refuge or escape from the violence.

II. OBJECTIVES

This study was designed to provide insights into how African-American and Caucasian women in urban and rural settings perceive the factors that placed them at risk for an abusive relationship, as well as the factors that protected them from further violence during and after the relationship. *In Her Own Words: A Focus Group Study of Risk and Protective Factors in Intimate Partner Violence* presents what abused women tell us about why they stay, what increases their risk of violence, and how the violence ends. The more known about these issues, the more effective public health interventions can be in assisting women to end violence against them and in improving the response of social systems designed to protect us all.

Prochaska's and DiClemente's Transtheoretical Model (also known as Stages of Change) served as the conceptual framework for the study.' The model depicts a sequence of five stages-precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance--that culminate in lasting behavior change. This model of behavior change was used to gain insights into how women perceived, coped with, and eventually ended the violence they experienced. As in other applications, the model allows researchers to define and understand the sequence of change, and to determine which types of interventions would be most helpful to women at varying stages of violent relationships.

This study was designed to learn:

- the nature and scope of violent and abusive relationships
- early warning signs of violence
- triggers to violence
- why women stay in violent relationships
- what makes or helps women decide to end the violence
- what and who supports them in ending the violence
- barriers to leaving the relationship or ending the violence
- advice to women who had been hit for the first time
- what women know now that they wish they had known earlier
- messages to other women and to society

'Prochaska, J and DiClemente, C.. 1992. Stages of Change in the Modification of Problem Behaviors. In: ***Progress in Behavior Modification, 28,*** 183-2 18.

These findings will be empirically tested, in a national telephone survey. Specific information on the risk and protective factors identified by abused women in these studies will be used to design interventions and communication messages, as well as to highlight areas where further research is warranted.

III. METHODOLOGY

Twenty-two focus groups were conducted to explore the risk and protective factors that African-American and Caucasian women identified in examining their own relationship histories, as well as specific strategies that women have used to eliminate violence from their relationships and protect themselves. Focus groups were chosen as the most appropriate data collection technique to capture the nuances and dimensions of responses about the abuse process. In addition, focus groups offered the advantage of group interaction to corroborate or amplify the statements of individual respondents.

Focus groups were conducted in urban and rural areas in Georgia, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Oregon. Participants were recruited with the assistance of local coordinators in each city or town where the groups were held. The coordinators recruited participants by placing fliers and newspaper advertisements asking,

> ***Have you left a violent relationship where you were repeatedly hif, slapped, punched, or kicked? Are you in a relationship now that used to be violent?***

These recruitment print pieces were placed where adult women were likely to gather, such as beauty salons, social service agencies, community colleges, health clinics, and women's restrooms. At every stage of recruitment, confirmation, and participation, the safety of participants was of paramount concern to the study team. For example, fliers did not divulge the location of the focus groups nor did answering machine messages, directions, and other materials mention the nature of the discussion.

The coordinators screened potential participants to ensure that they met the study criteria. Participants had to be 18 years of age or older, have experienced physical violence in an intimate relationship with a male partner, and experienced no violence for at least six months prior to the focus group discussion date. A small stipend and child care were provided as incentives for participation. Participants also received information on local resources available for victims of intimate partner violence.

Trained moderators guided the focus group discussions by asking questions on definitions of violence, early warning signs, triggers, why women stayed and left, who helped them, what advice they would give to other abused women, and what messages should be communicated to society. In addition, participants were asked to complete an adjective card sorting exercise that described how they felt before or early in the relationship, during the violence, and once the violence had ended.

Text analysis software (Tally) was used to code transcripts of the audio taped focus group discussions. The codes encompassed categories for descriptions of violence, risk and protective factors for partner abuse, and subsets within responses to each set of questions. Each transcript was coded by two different reviewers to enhance inter-rater reliability. The text analysis software allowed reporting of focus group data by discussion topic as well as by race/ethnicity (African-American and Caucasian) and location (urban or rural). Results were analyzed for prevalence of responses (for example, responses that occurred only or predominantly in one type of group) as well as for the context of each quote. In addition, the transcripts and adjective card responses were analyzed according to the stages and processes of change as defined in the Transtheoretical Model.

One hundred and sixty-eight (168) women participated in the study. They ranged in age from 18 to 60, and reported being out of the abusive relationship from six months to 25 years. Rural women comprised 45 percent of respondents (n = 76); urban women comprised 55 percent of respondents (n = 92). Fifty-three (53) percent of participants were African-American; 47 percent were Caucasian.

IV. FINDINGS

Although some differences were found between African-American women and Caucasian women and between urban and rural groups, the most striking finding was the similar contours described by women from all walks of life as they examined the abuse in their pasts.

Nature and scope of violent and abusive relationships

Confirming the results of previous research, focus group participants noted that while the violence and the injuries incurred are detrimental, the **long-term effects** of emotional and physical abuse are often even worse. The constant fear of violence and uncertainty about when it would occur or how severe it might be led women to describe a terrifying and paralyzing **climate** of violence. Stalking during and after the relationship is only the most graphic of a wide range of behaviors that reflected often extreme attempts to control the abused woman's actions and reactions. A wide range of psychologically and physically abusive acts were described by focus group participants, including abuse not only of themselves but also of children and pets. Many of these acts had in common **escalation over time** and increasing **lethality.**

Triggers to violence

Although participants each listed numerous and varied triggers, most concluded that **anything** could be a trigger to violence-and that this realization was a significant contributor to the terror, fear, and desperation they felt in their relationships. A wide range of trivial and serious triggers were mentioned, including jealousy, fights, noisy children, unsatisfactory or late meals, financial worries, or stresses at work. Some women mentioned that their own successes and independence were important triggers to their partners' violence. African-American urban women referred more frequently to violence occurring in response to standing up to or "talking back" to their

partners. Even more common was the link in all participants' minds between **substance abuse and violence.** For many participants, this association led them to focus their efforts on ending their partners' drinking or drug use.

Early warning signs

When asked to reflect on early warning signs of an abusive relationship, participants agreed on a number of problem behaviors. While there was consensus on the actual signs, there was skepticism that most women could heed these signs early enough in the relationship. Paradoxically, several of the potential warning signs-charm, whirlwind romances, possessiveness-were consistent with what many women expected and desired in a relationship. Moreover, any single early warning sign is not necessarily significant or predictive of future abuse. What was critical to participants was the **constellation** and **escalation of problem behaviors.** Many women also described **factors that they brought to the relationship:** low or non-existent self esteem, violence as the norm in their homes and communities, youth and inexperience in relationships, and low standards or expectations of relationships.

Participants spoke at length about their abusive partners, particularly the partner's own history of violence at home and its almost inevitable replication in adult relationships. The most common word used to describe abusive partners was "controlling." **Control** manifested itself as extreme possessiveness and jealousy, often leading to stalking, mistrust, and constant accusations of infidelity. Control also included attempts to direct and shape the woman's behavior and to **isolate** her from family and friends. An African-American **woman** recalls:

> ***He was trying to keep me to himself. He never wanted me to go anywhere. My mom would call, "What are you on the phone talking to her for?" Because she's my mother, you know... when he gets home he wants his dinner cooked...It was all about him, what he wanted.***

Focus group participants pointed to various clues about abusive men that could be detected in his **insecurities, the ways he treated others,** and **blaming others** for everything that went wrong. Most insidiously, abusers blamed their victims for the abuse itself. Other markers included **extreme charm** alternating with **explosive rage,** or a Jekyll and Hyde personality-a foreshadowing of the cycle of abuse and remorse that followed.

Why women stay

Women stayed in abusive relationships for a host of complex reasons, including abiding love of their partners, commitment to wedding vows, desire to provide a two-parent home for their children, financial and emotional dependence, and raw fear of the repercussions of leaving. Responses generally clustered into two broad categories: **positive and hopeful** reasons on the one hand (such as hoping their partners could and would change), and **negative** ones on the other (such as feeling trapped, ashamed, and/or hopeless that any alternatives were open to her). The distinction between the two types of reasons is critical to understanding how women come to assess their readiness to take action. "Why I stay" is a qualitatively different stage of readiness than "why I cannot leave," with different implications for possible interventions. It is important to note that the decision to stay or leave was often a highly **rational choice-one** that carefully

and accurately took into account the pros and cons of the situation, particularly the often lethal consequences of leaving.

Why women leave

Focus group participants often described the decision to leave the violence as reaching a **breaking point.** Their responses depicted a **sudden shift** in how they saw their partners and themselves, Self re-evaluation, **loving themselves,** and considering their own needs were mentioned often as important precursors-points of view that were previously unfamiliar to many of the focus group participants. The escalation of abuse to a point of **lethality** was a decisive factor, either because it caused women to fear for their own lives, to want to end their lives, or to fear that they would kill their partners. **Children** were a powerful motivator for leaving as well, particularly as women became more and more concerned that their children were being affected by witnessing the violence, mimicking it, or being abused themselves. The descriptions of why women stayed and why they left pointed to a shift in how the pros and cons of staying in the relationship were weighed, with the realization that the violence would continue and escalate.

Roles of other relationships and institutions

Focus group participants chronicled a series of missed opportunities, misguided attempts to help that backfired, and outright hostility or counterproductive and harmful behaviors from individuals and institutions they turned to for help. In every group, some women declared that **no one** was instrumental in helping them leave, in part reflecting the isolation that is typical of abused women. However, this also reflects the lack of progress in having intimate partner violence detected and confronted by the legal, law enforcement, and medical professionals who are most ideally suited to intervene. The **police** and the **legal system's policies and practices** were most often cited as abetting abusive relationships. These two parts of the judicial system were viewed as unsympathetic and even punitive to women who are abused and simultaneously lenient or misguided in their treatment of abusers. As one African-American urban woman described:

> *I called and I said* to *the police, I said, 'He's following me.' . . . And they said, 'Until he touches you,* we can't *do anything.' I said, 'When he kills me dead, then my children can call.' . . . So what are my rights? 'You* can *call us if he comes back.'* But *by the time he's in my house,* cause *he broke in one time, by the time he's in my house I got no telephone, 'cause that's the first thing he cuts is the telephone. How am I supposed to call? And they* say that *this is how it is. I've got* no *sympathy, nothing from our local law enforcement. Nothing.*

Prominent among missed opportunities was the **lack of involvement of medical staff and settings.** Helpful medical personnel were rarely mentioned by Caucasian women and never by African-American women. The **church** was considered an indirectly enabling force because of teachings and beliefs to adhere to marriage vows at any cost, combined with social and religious censure of divorce. Both the **abuser's and the victim's families** played roles as enablers of the abusive relationship, either by ignoring clear signs of violence, urging women to return and "try again," or concurring that she must be doing something to trigger the abuse.

Both **friends** and **relatives** were described as unhelpful in their reluctance to get involved, failing to offer concrete help, and/or making judgmental comments.

In contrast to the lack of support described above, many women spoke with deep gratitude about those who had assisted them at critical junctures. Honest and caring **friends** and **relatives** were mentioned most frequently as sources of support and encouragement. Co-workers, members of the abuser's family, and neighbors were also cited, although far less frequently. While information and emotional support were valued, **concrete** assistance--transportation, money, a place to stay-lifted the final logistical barriers to leaving an abusive relationship. African-American women specifically mentioned the role of their **spiritual faith** in helping them cope with and overcome violence in their relationships. Although this often was described as a personal (for example, through prayer) rather than an institutional source of help, churches as institutions also were mentioned. **Other than the role of the family and church, African-American women were silent on the subject of helpful social institutions.** For Caucasian women, shelters were mentioned most frequently as a helpful social institution. Similarly, Caucasian women cited counseling as a source of support.

What women wish they had known

Looking back, women wished they had been able to believe that **someone other than their abuser could love them. They** also would have wanted to know about the warning signs of abuse and about the dynamics of abuse, particularly that there was nothing they could do to stop it and that years of efforts to do so ultimately would be futile. Finally, women would have wanted to know more about **the resources available to them.**

Advice to other women

Participants were asked what advice they would give to a friend or relative who had been hit by her partner for the first time. The emphatic message by most participants was to **leave the relationship** because the man who hits once is certain to do so again, and to become more violent over time. The sometimes spirited dissent was not necessarily regarding whether or not to leave, but whether to wait for a second occurrence. In either case, most women suggested a **strong response at the first sign of abuse,** signaling that such behavior would not be tolerated. They most often mentioned calling the police and filing a complaint so that a record of abuse is established and documented. If a woman returns after a first incident, she should clearly indicate her intent to leave if a second incident occurs, and follow through. Despite the strength and near unanimity of these sentiments, **respondents agreed that they would not have taken this advice if it had been offered to them.**

Messages to society

Focus group participants stressed four key messages to society at large. First, they felt strongly that **elementary and middle-school girls and boys need to learn that intimate partner abuse is wrong.** Youth also need the skills to detect abuse and the tools and wherewithal to demand higher standards in their relationships. Participants believed that imparting this

information to young girls and boys would serve as a general **preventive measure** and could also **counter messages at home** about violence as the norm in relationships. Another powerful message that surfaced in the focus group discussions was that **men face little censure from the courts, their peers, or their families** for their abusive behavior. Abused women want society to know how poorly the legal system has served them, and to express outrage by that knowledge. They also want individuals to become involved-to **know the warning signs for abuse** and **to intervene.** Focus group participants also discussed various **channels for communicating information on resources available to abused women.** While they wanted this information to be widely available (through television programs, radio talk shows, yellow pages, grocery stores, and doctor's offices), participants also cited that the abused woman's safety was a key consideration, since it could be dangerous for her to keep materials with her or at her home. A suggested solution to this problem was offering an easily memorized telephone number that women could call during an emergency, without having to look it up.

V. APPLYING THE TRANSTHEORETICAL MODEL TO INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

The Transtheoretical Model's descriptions of stages of change and the processes needed to move from one stage to the next have held true across a wide variety of behaviors. An emphasis on incremental, sequential steps has turned the focus from unrealistically grandiose behavior change to a series of less ambitious steps that slowly, but more surely, lead to lasting change-essential for ending intimate partner violence.

Applying this model to violence between intimate partners raises challenging issues. The model reflects *intentional and individual* behavior change. In contrast, the cessation of intimate partner violence introduces the dynamic of a relationship between two people, in which one person exerts physical and psychological force over the other. In this case, the "problem behavior" is the partner's violence, and **the stages of change that a woman moves through in response to this problem are reactions to someone else's actions.**

Another challenge is how the ultimate behavior change goal is defined. Also, for abused women, as with other populations contemplating complex changes, the model's time frames are generally too short. Both the pace of change and the complexity of recovery or maintenance must be accounted for in adapting the model to intimate partner violence.

Despite these potential limitations, the Transtheoretical Model provides insights into the sequence and duration of steps that abused women experience. These insights are essential to designing interventions that match the intricate psychology of abused women, and that can therefore succeed in helping her acknowledge the violence in her intimate relationships.

Precontemplation

In other applications of the Transtheoretical Model, precontemplation is sometimes characterized as denial or minimizing of the problem behavior. Many abused women deny or

minimize the problem of abuse, especially when the abuse is primarily emotional. Moreover, a key feature of the cycle of violence-violent episodes followed by calm or "honeymoon" periods-reinforces denial. However, denying or minimizing the violence in their relationships is facilitated by the abusive partners discrediting the abused woman's version of events, questioning her sanity, and accusing her of imagining her assaults. The role of the abusive partner in perpetuating a stage of precontemplation is a critical difference with other applications of the model, and also suggests opportunities for intervention.

For some abused women, their **lack of awareness centers not on the violence itself, but on their sense of who is responsible for it.** Again, with reinforcement from their partners *("Why did you make me do this to* you? *"),* many abused women believe that they trigger the violence through their own behavior. This, in turn, leads them to another marker of precontemplation: **they believe that the violence is controllable.** Unlike many other behavior change challenges, however, the behavior that they believe can be controlled is not their own, but their abuser's.

Like other types of precontemplators, abused women are reluctant to acknowledge and discuss the problem with others. Participants reported that they feared the "I told you so" reaction from friends and relatives who had warned them about their partner's shortcomings. At the other extreme, some women feared that no one would believe them, because their abusers had such a different image (charming, affable, etc.) outside the relationship. Similarly, protecting outside images of a "perfect relationship" was important to some women. Others reported the shame they felt in admitting that they had tolerated the abuse. Still others faced outright hostility from those they approached for support. The outside confirmation that they must have done something to provoke the abuse substantiated the abuser's version of events and discouraged abused women from seeking help.

An important characteristic of precontemplation is the belief that the pros or benefits of the behavior (i.e., remaining in the relationship) outweigh its negative consequences (i.e., suffering abuse). For abused women, the weighing of pros and cons occurs against a dramatic backdrop of dubious pros—financial independence, single status-and extremely adverse consequences being alone, losing children and shelter, and facing threats of escalated violence. Her partner's influence in perpetuating these beliefs cannot be underestimated *("No one will want you," "I'm going to take* you *to court to get the kids. "*). If an abused woman's own safety and survival are taken into account as the overriding "pro" or "con," her decision to stay seems much more **rational.** Moreover, the vast gulf between pros and cons also helps explain why abused women hover in some version of precontemplation for so long before contemplating or taking action. Also, this gulf between pros and cons also explains why **individuals in the precontemplation phase are least responsive to interventions.**

Contemplation

As the abused woman considers the prospects for change, she repeats the weighing of pros and cons in the precontemplation phase. However, the balance between pros and cons begins to shift. For example, many of the focus group participants noted that they were very young when

they became involved with their abusers and had no knowledge or experience to alert them to the fact that violence and control were outside the parameters of healthy intimate relationships.

As the abuse continues, women may find it more difficult to feel reassured by the honeymoon period, particularly if the violence escalates in frequency and/or severity. In addition, continued abuse takes its toll physically and psychologically, not only on the abused woman but on her children as well. A re-evaluation of the abusive behavior and attention to these consequences, mingled with less and less faith that the situation has any chance of improving, can move the abused woman toward contemplating her options. When she does contemplate her options, however, she confronts the same barriers she faced in the precontemplation phase. In fact, she may feel even more powerless to act because her isolation, shame, and lack of resources are likely to have worsened over time. **The lack of options and support** was a common theme in the focus group discussions.

Preparation and Action

In the **action** stage, individuals take overt steps to change the behavior. As with the other stages, however, it must be reiterated that the preparations and actions of abused women depend heavily on the counteractions (actual or threatened) of their abusers.

In contrast to the prolonged, ambivalent stages of precontemplation and contemplation, abused women reported relatively **sudden preparation and action.** A critical factor in preparation and action is the safety and well-being of children. Part of the transition to preparation and action is **regaining the sense of self** that they feel was lost or embattled during the violence. Women described waking up, seeing through new eyes, a lifting of a fog that obscured the reality of their situation.

For abused women, **readiness to** change--essential to successful preparation and action-seems to include the dual dimensions of psychological readiness and logistical readiness. In many cases, the intense psychological readiness to leave is achieved before the logistical arrangements are in place.

Maintenance

For abused women, the maintenance stage requires determination and resolve, as it does for others seeking to change behaviors. However, the requisite determination and resolve are vital at a point in time when the abused woman's resources are often depleted. **After taking action, she is literally in recovery from her ordeal.** Several women in the focus groups used the term "healing" to describe themselves after the violent relationship. Her formidable psychological and logistical tasks can include bolstering her sense of self, dealing with the effects of depression, developing and maintaining financial independence (often for the first time), re-creating a home, dealing with the reactions of children and others, and often contact with the abuser as well. Another important task is relapse prevention-avoiding the return to damaging relationship patterns and situations for both the relationship she has left and future intimate relationships.

The damage done to an abused woman, often over a period of years, is not easily or rapidly repaired. One woman described how she still slept with a pillow over her head to protect herself from beatings-24 years after leaving her abuser. In addition to instinctive fear of their former abusers, many of the women were apprehensive and skeptical about future relationships.

Despite these qualms, most of the women did describe themselves as hopeful, optimistic, calm, confident, and successful. Even as they struggled with financial difficulties, they savored the freedom from violence. Many had learned hard lessons, and were proud of their new-found independence.

Summary: Transtheoretical Model and Abused Women

Based on these analyses, we suggest that for abused women, the first two stages—precontemplation and contemplation—are combined into a single overlapping stage that may be prolonged over a period of many years. Over time, her weighing of the pros and cons of staying in the relationship gradually shifts her towards preparation and action. In contrast to the prolonged ambivalence of precontemplation and contemplation, preparation and action stages are quite sudden for many abused women. Once they have achieved psychological readiness, the removal of logistical barriers such as housing, children, or employment can move them to immediate action.

VI. IMPLICATIONS

The women who participated in this focus group study offered wisdom, information, and strategies to help:

- create health communications messages to help other vulnerable women
- enlighten and inform key institutions whose actions can serve to keep women entrapped or help liberate them from violence
- shape the way society in general thinks about and treats women, especially those who are abused.

Implications for Prevention

We learned from the women in our focus groups that intimate partner violence can occur in relationships irrespective of socioeconomic status, education, ethnicity, or locale. Three categories of special prevention implications emerge from the study:

- vigilance in identifying early warning signs
- the role of family history of abuse
- reaching early adolescents before they initiate intimate relationships

Vigilance in Identifying Early Warning Signs

This study reminds us that anyone is at risk for intimate partner violence. Any single early warning sign-charm, whirlwind romance, possessiveness, criticism, testing limits, blaming others-is not necessarily significant nor predictive of future abuse. What is critical is the constellation and escalation of problem behaviors, especially those that control, shame, and isolate women. Prevention efforts assisting girls and women to identify early warning signs, apply these signs to their relationships, and act on high standards for intimate relationships can help stem the tide of intimate partner abuse.

The Role of Family History of Abuse

One of the most profound findings in this study is the role of prior history of violence or substance abuse in families of origin. For women and their abusers, family history of violence and abuse of alcohol and other substances increases vulnerability to intimate partner violence, and limits the ability to detect early warning signs. If a man or woman was abused as a child and/or witnessed violence at home, key health communication messages might include,

> ***Intimate partner violence* can *happen to* anyone, *but you are particularly at risk* if you *grew up witnessing violence in your home* or *being abused. Watch for these early warning signs...***

From a public health perspective, identifying early experience with violence as a risk factor is equivalent to identifying women who have a family history of breast cancer for prevention and early intervention.

Reaching Early Adolescents

The gender roles and expectations that girls and women absorb from family and society contribute to their beliefs about relationships, self-worth, assertiveness/submissiveness, and expectations. All of these factors are critical in protecting or extricating them from a violent relationship. In early adolescence, girls lose confidence and self-esteem, while seeking approval from peers and boys. Factors such as relationship naivete, early marriage, and whirlwind romance for adolescent girls are areas of susceptibility and require future study. From a prevention point of view, an important health education role in late elementary school is teaching youth about healthy relationships, early warning signs, setting limits on inappropriate behavior, and communicating concern to others.

Implications for Intervention

A number of modifiable protective factors for women (such as completing her education, setting appropriate boundaries in a relationship, staying connected to family and friends) can reduce the exposure, escalation, duration, and possible lethality of intimate partner abuse. Even when protective factors are absent or insufficient, prevention and intervention programs can make a difference by:

- tipping the decisional balance from staying to leaving before greater morbidity is incurred

- fostering helping relationships to provide tangible and emotional support
- improving the response of social institutions

Each is discussed below.

Tipping the Decisional Balance

The Stages of Change model, as applied to intimate partner violence, suggests that a woman's readiness is an essential precursor to her leaving a violent relationship. Efforts to help her leave before she is ready are not only futile, but may result in further isolation and immobilization. Rather, the aim should be to tip the decisional balance from staying to leaving before greater morbidity is incurred. Reducing women's psychological barriers requires interventions that help her to recognize the severity of the violence, change her beliefs about herself and her relationships, and build confidence to be able to leave and care for herself and her children. Strategies to help her recognize the effects of abuse include:

. Demonstrating how her abuse affects her children, not only currently but in terms of presenting a damaged model for future intimate relationships

. Providing information safely on the early warning signs of an abusive relationship or characteristics of abusive partners, particularly the escalation over time

Logistical barriers, such as lack of housing and finances, can be countered by making information on available resources and alternatives more widely known, including the necessary components of a safety plan, staying in a friend's home, going to a shelter, or getting an emergency loan from an employer.

Fostering Helping Relationships

Women in the focus groups offered numerous suggestions to improve helping relationships. Rather than urging the woman to leave the relationship, women suggest that family and friends **acknowledge the abuse, show concern for her welfare, and offer to help her develop a safety plan.** A critical element is to **respect the abused woman's own time line.** Offering support to abused women on the condition that they leave the relationship further isolates them if they are not ready to take that step. Supportive and non-judgmental friends, family, coworkers, and neighbors offer another version of reality, rather than the distortions she absorbs from her partner. It is often in the context of others that the abused woman can see that violence is not acceptable and that there are alternatives and options available.

Improving the Response of Social Institutions

This study offers many tangible suggestions about the ways that social institutions-police, courts, medical facilities, religious institutions, schools, workplace, shelters and social service agencies-can help women who are subjected to intimate partner violence. They offer the

potential for protection and interventions. The question-and, often, the problem-is, how these institutions see their role for intervention in intimate partner violence.

Institutions with which we all interact can shape a powerful message and provide essential help. On the whole, however, key social institutions must understand the complexities of intimate partner violence to comprehend "Why women stay" or "Why women go back to him."

There are also specific institutions that abused women seek out. The quality of the interaction and assistance provided the first time women reach out to these agencies and services will influence women's sense of options during other episodes. Positive interactions will increase her sense of alternatives and confidence to act when she is ready. The report offers key recommendations for the workplace, religious institutions, the police and legal system, hospital and medical personnel, domestic violence shelters, and schools.

Implications for Future Research

A number of topics generated by these findings warrant further research. These include:

- the impact of witnessing or experiencing violence during childhood
- early adolescent risk factors for intimate violence prevention
- relationship history (age and degree of violence at first incident, frequency and severity of battering incidents, involvement of children, type of battering)
- escalation history (precursors, point(s) in the relationship where it escalated, form of escalation, reactions to escalation)
- perceptions of violence in the relationship, particularly attributions of fault and responsibility
- methods that shift a woman's decisional balance toward leaving the violent relationship
- resurgence of abuse in relationships that were once violent.
- violence cessation (time since leaving last violent relationship, subsequent contacts with ex-partner, expectations for future relationships)
- risk and protective factors for women or spouses in police departments and the military
- risk and protective factors for Hispanic, Asian women, immigrants and refugees

Perhaps most significantly, these results raise questions for future study about risk and protective factors of men who perpetrate intimate partner violence.

VI I. CONCLUSION

In Her Own *Words* is a qualitative research study that offers insight into the experience of formerly abused women. It illuminates the "why's" of complex interpersonal relationships. The next important step in building a knowledge and intervention base will be to empirically validate these findings in a national telephone survey of women's risk and protective factors for intimate partner violence. Prevention and early intervention will not only save lives now, but will prevent this "generational curse" from damaging future generations.

Introduction

To most outside observers, the behavior of abused women seems inexplicable. Belittled, controlled, and assaulted, they react not with the indignation and outrage we expect, but with mystifying resignation and acceptance. Year after year, they insist to themselves that they can change their partner's behavior, believing (with his encouragement) that they are somehow responsible for it. From our vantage point outside the relationship, we are perplexed by the abused woman's resignation to her fate, by the absence of anger, the seeming tolerance of intolerable affronts. Often, our visceral reaction to the plight of a woman trapped in an abusive relationship is some version of "Why does she stay?'

The purpose of this study was to provide insights into how African-American and Caucasian women in urban and rural settings perceive the factors that placed them *at risk* for an abusive relationship, as well as the factors that *protected* them during and after the relationship.

This report presents what abused women themselves tell us about why they stay, what puts them at risk, and how they protect themselves, By reflecting on their experiences, we can learn many important nuances of intimate partner violence to shape prevention and early intervention efforts. The report is organized into the following main sections:

- an overview of the dynamics of intimate partner violence
- a theoretical framework for understanding how abused women end the violence
- a description of the focus group methodology used in this study
- a summary of the focus group discussions
- an analysis of the focus group findings
- implications for future research and interventions

The individual stories of the women who participated in the focus groups confirm much of what is already known about the dynamics of abuse. These distressing common experiences link women from all walks of life in a sisterhood that is characterized by not only degradation and terror, but also for its prevalence. In addition to confirming existing knowledge about the dynamics of abuse,

the experiences of focus group participants reveal the many individual paths that have put women at risk and ultimately led them to freedom from the violence in their relationships. This report represents one attempt to learn from these individual and collective stories.

Intimate Partner Violence: An Overview

Intimate partner violence is a war of attrition; power and control over another person are the coveted prizes. The weapons of violence--epithets, threats, slaps, punches, kicks, and rape-are the means to capture these prizes, not ends in themselves. However, the woman does not know she is at war, often until she becomes a hostage whose life is in imminent danger. Because the battle is over power and control, the abused woman's sense of self worth becomes a central element of the equation. Whether the abused woman's self esteem is already low before she meets her abuser or whether he systematically erodes whatever self esteem she has, she is left without the protective layer of self worth that sends up red flags of warning. *"By the time he hit me,"* abused women report, *"I thought I deserved it."*

Many abused women describe their j-antic, desperate, and ultimately futile attempts to "prevent" the violence in their lives by removing any possible triggers that might ignite their partner's wrath.

The abused woman's reduced sense of self also opens the door to blaming herself for her partner's violence. Many abused women describe their frantic, desperate, and ultimately futile attempts to "prevent" the violence in their lives by removing any possible triggers that might ignite their partner's wrath: immaculately cleaning the house, cooking perfect meals, quieting the children, voicing no opinions. The futility of these efforts, if it is not recognized, only compounds her growing sense of failure and shame. Shame about her situation also prevents her from reaching out to others for help. Over time, reaching out becomes increasingly difficult because of the abused woman's isolation from friends and family. Isolation is an effective tool of the abuser for increasing power and control, since it cuts off not only support and practical help, but also the "reality check" that might help an abused woman view the violence in her life through a different lens.

Interwoven with the abused woman's sense of self is her sense of relationships-her romantic dreams and ideals, her expectations of herself and her partner, what she thinks society expects of her as a wife and mother. Love is a tantalizingly complex emotion at its best. At its worst, it can become entangled in the violence that an abused woman experiences, contributing to her confusion. In part, this is due to the cyclical nature of intimate partner violence, in which a period of escalating tension explodes in a violent incident, followed by a "honeymoon" or relatively calm period of remorse, forgiveness, and renewed hope. Through these cycles-regardless of the intervals between them-abused women experience the confusing intermingling of pain and affection.

If an abused woman is very young and inexperienced in the dynamics of relationships, she may have few examples and instincts of her own to guide her. Whether younger or older, she may lack examples of healthy intimate relationships because she has never seen them modeled among her own relatives and friends. She and her partner may have grown up witnessing violence in their own homes or may have been the targets of violence themselves, concluding that violence at home is the norm-as indeed it was, for one or both of them. However, it is important to note that violent pasts are not always the precursors of abusive relationships. Women with strong self esteem who grew up in loving and supportive families are also at risk.

The next section describes a theoretical framework used to explain the process that abused women move through as they recognize the violence in their lives and take action to end it.

THE TRANSTHEORETICAL MODEL: A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING RESPONSESTO INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

The theoretical basis for this study is Prochaska's and DiClemente's Transtheoretical Model (also known as Stages of Change). Departing from behavior change models that view change as an all-or-nothing event, the Transtheoretical Model acknowledges the complexity of behavior change by describing five stages that individuals move through as they achieve lasting behavior change.[2] This model of behavior change allows researchers to define and understand the sequence of change, and to determine what types of interventions would be most helpful to women at varying stages of violent relationships. The characteristics of each stage are described below:

The Transtheoretical Model is particularly useful in trying to understand and support the sometimes circuitous path to behavior change that is typical of leaving or ending abuse within relationships.

- **Precontemplation**-individuals have no intention to change behavior and are unaware of the risk, or deny its consequences for them
- **Contemplation-individuals** are aware of the risk of the problem behavior and are considering overcoming it, but are not yet committed to taking action in the near future
- **Preparation-individuals** are ready for action in the near future and may have taken inconsistent action in the recent past
- **Action-the** stage in which behavior, experiences, or the environment are modified in order to overcome problems, but the change is new and recent
- **Maintenance-the** individual works to prevent relapse and consolidate gains attained during action

[2] Prochaska, J and DiClemente, C.. 1992. Stages of Change in the Modification of Problem Behaviors. In: ***Progress in Behavior Modification, 28,*** 183-2 18.

The Transtheoretical Model also suggests that individuals rely on 10 distinct processes as they move from one stage to the next. The processes encompass cognitive, behavioral, and emotional components. The specific processes are as follows:

- **Consciousness** raising-increasing information about self and problem
- **Self re-evaluation-assessing** how one feels and thinks about oneself with respect to a problem
- **Environmental re-evaluation-assessing** how one's problem affects the physical environment
- **Self liberation-choosing** and commitment to act or belief in ability to change
- **Social liberation-increasing** alternatives for non-problem behaviors available in society
- **Counter-conditioning-substituting** alternatives for problem behaviors
- **Stimulus** control-avoiding or countering stimuli that elicit problem behaviors
- **Reinforcement management**—rewarding oneself or being rewarded by others for making changes
- **Dramatic** relief--experiencing and expressing feelings about one's problems and solutions
- **Helping relationships**—being open and trusting about problems with someone who cares

A wide variety of research on abused women has revealed both the length of this process (measured in years, not months or days) and its complexity. The Transtheoretical Model is particularly useful in trying to understand and support the sometimes circuitous path to behavior change that is typical of leaving or ending abuse within relationships. By definition, an abused women experiences a combination of physical and psychological abuse that erodes her self esteem. In order to protect herself from these threats to her well-being, she must first re-establish (or, in many cases, establish

for the first time) a sense of self worth that in turn enables her to envision a life without violence, and to act on that vision.

In terms of the Transtheoretical Model, the stages of an abused woman's journey toward change might translate as follows:

- **Precontemplation-denial** of risk (*"It won't happen again"*) and its consequences (*"He didn't really hurt me"*); lack of awareness that absence of risk is even an option (for example, no family or other models of non-violent relationships)

- **Contemplation-realizahon** that the abuser is responsible for the abuse (shift from *"It's my fault"*); beginning to entertain the possibility of different types of relationships (*"Life can be different"*)

- **Preparation-specific** plans to act and to support self (e.g., disclosing abuse to friends and family, attending support group, attending counseling, developing a safety plan)

- **Action---taking** a specific, definitive action to reduce or eliminate violence in the relationship (e.g., obtaining a restraining order, moving out)

- Maintenance-continuing to stay out of the violent relationship, or in a new relationship without violence; vigilant about warning signs

This focus group study was designed to gain a better understanding of how abused women move through the stages of change. An emphasis on incremental, sequential steps shifts attention from unrealistically grandiose behavior change to a series of less ambitious steps that slowly, but more surely, lead to lasting change. The application of the Transtheoretical Model is described in greater detail following the section on focus group findings, below, which describes the methodology, data collection, and analysis procedures of the study.

Twenty-two focus groups were conducted to explore the risk and protective factors that African-American and Caucasian women identified in examining their own relationship histories, as well as specific strategies that women have used to eliminate violence from their relationships and protect themselves. Exhibit I shows the composition and location of the focus groups conducted for this study.

Focus groups were selected as the appropriate data collection technique for several reasons. First, abused women are the most knowledgeable experts on abuse, its dynamics, and consequences. Focus groups offer a mechanism for hearing their stories, encouraging them to reflect on their experiences, and react to each others' insights. Abused women's stories are complex, intricate, and idiosyncratic, but they also share many common elements and patterns that are of particular interest to researchers seeking preventive interventions. As a data collection tool, focus groups give us an opportunity to hear individual stories and simultaneously probe for common themes and experiences.

In contrast to quantitative research tools that ask "How many?" and "How often?", focus groups help to answer research questions emanating from the question "Why?" In this case, these included questions about why women stay in abusive relationships and why and how they leave. (A complete discussion guide is provided in Appendix A.) Like individual interviews, focus groups offer an opportunity to explore the nuances of individuals' views and responses. Unlike individual interviews, however, focus groups offer the added benefit of interaction among the participants. For example, one participant's recollections of the early warning signs of violence in her relationship could remind others of warning signs in their own relationships that might not have surfaced in an individual interview.

Despite these strengths, focus groups have methodologic limitations that should be acknowledged at the outset. First, the findings are not quantitative and cannot be extrapolated to the population at large. Focus group results are suggestive, rather than definitive. They rely on group, not individual analyses. They should be used to enrich an understanding of an issue, rather than to

unequivocally support a particular position. For this reason, minority viewpoints voiced during focus group discussions may take on more significance in the analysis than they would when other types of data collection techniques are used. In surveys, for example, "outlier" points of views might be discounted. In focus groups, the outlier viewpoint may provide a telling insight that warrants analytic attention.

Exhibit I — Composition and Location of Focus Groups

REGION	AFRICAN-AMERICAN, URBAN	AFRICAN-AMERICAN, RURAL	CAUCASIAN, URBAN	CAUCASIAN, RURAL
Southeast	Atlanta Georgia (2 groups)	Douglasville, Georgia (1 group)	Atlanta Georgia (2 groups)	Waycross, Georgia (1 group)
Midwest	Chicago Illinois (2 groups)	Peoria area, Illinois (2 groups)	Chicago Illinois (2 groups)	Peoria area, Illinois (2 groups)
Mid-Atlantic	Pittsburgh Pennsylvania (2 groups)	Uniontown, Pennsylvania (2 groups)		
West			Portland, Oregon (2 groups)	Eugene area, Oregon (2 groups)
TOTAL NUMBER OF GROUPS: 22	6	5	6	5

Interpreting and analyzing focus group comments requires finesse and a certain tolerance of ambiguity. For example, focus group transcripts may not capture every comment due to combinations of soft-spoken participants and varying audio taping quality. Each instance of a code or statement is treated as unique. However, we know that women repeat statements and themes throughout transcripts, possibly causing analysts to overestimate the occurrences of certain themes. Likewise, since we cannot count the quiet agreement ("umm hmmms") and nodding heads, there may be an underestimation of the consensus or agreement within groups and the prevalence of certain feelings or themes within the groups. Another difficulty is differentiating between individual comments by separate participants, or repeated comments by the same participant. For this reason, raw "counts" of the number of times a word or concept is mentioned should not be the primary basis for focus group findings. These types of counts can illustrate trends when they are extreme-for example, when one set of participants always mentions a particular belief, and another set never does. Smaller differences, however, should be treated cautiously, for they may be artifacts of transcription and taping difficulties.

The value of focus groups also relies heavily on the moderator's skill in managing the group in such a way that a range of representative views emerges. This is particularly difficult with a topic as emotionally painful as intimate partner violence, in which participants are asked to recall incidents and reactions that were traumatic, humiliating, and emotionally harrowing. For the moderator, this represents a challenge not only in probing for details that may be painful to disclose, but also in gently but firmly steering the conversation back to the research questions, if a particular participant's testimony veers off course.

Despite these constraints, focus group interviews can yield valuable insights that are difficult or impossible to glean through other data collection techniques. These insights are important in their own right, but they also can be applied in shaping and refining more rigorous, quantitative research efforts. For example, the results of these focus groups will be used to develop a national telephone survey of intimate partner violence to gain an empirical understanding of risk and protective factors.

The following section describes the methods used to collect and analyze the focus group data.

Methodology

Data Collection

This section describes how participants were recruited and screened and how the focus groups were conducted. In addition, unique challenges raised by collecting data from abused women are described.

Recruitment

Recruiting participants for this project required setting criteria for participants, recruiting them into the study, and then screening participants to ensure that they met the criteria for participation. Each phase is described below.

The study resources allowed for a total of approximately 24 focus groups, to be conducted in different locations across the country. Given that the focus groups would address the general issues of risk and protective factors in intimate partner violence, there were several opportunities for dividing the groups among dimensions of interest, to see if the groups revealed any differences among types of respondents. These included differences between:

- rural and urban women
- Caucasian and African-American women
- women who left abusive relationships and women who ended the violence but chose to stay in the relationship.

We were able to recruit both rural and urban Caucasian and African-American women, with varying levels of difficulty (described in greater detail below). However, the number of women who had stayed in formerly violent relationships was too small to sustain separate groups for this population.

Instead, the few women in this category who responded to recruiting initiatives were included in the focus groups of women who had left the abusive relationships.

In addition to the recruiting categories listed above, participants had to meet the following criteria:

- experienced physical violence in an intimate relationship with a male partner
- were 18 years of age or older (to be able to provide informed consent to participate)
- had been out of the relationship for 6 months or longer, *or* had not experienced violence in the relationship for at least 6 months.

Researchers and service providers have struggled over exact definitions of what constitutes an abusive relationship and how different levels of abuse can be classified and compared. As described in the focus group findings, the specific level or type of abuse in a relationship may be less significant than its effects on the abused woman. For some women, the occasional threat of violence is as terrifying as repeated beatings are for other women. In terms of recruiting possible participants, this presented a challenge for the study team regarding how to define the abusive relationships to determine criteria for participation.

In recruiting participants for this study, we chose to limit the recruiting to women who had experienced some type of physical abuse. Because of the dynamics of abuse described above, this criterion was sure to include emotional abuse as well-as was borne out by the focus group discussions. Emotional abuse-while pervasive, severe, and, in the opinion of some abused women, the cause of more lasting damage than physical abuse-was too difficult to define for recruiting and screening purposes. Thus, using the physical abuse criterion allowed us to recruit with greater certainty that participants met the study criteria, without losing the opportunity to learn more about the effects of emotional abuse.

The fact that women from all walks of life are vulnerable to abuse and that a variety of factors could potentially either place them at risk or protect them also made it difficult to narrow the recruiting criteria. **It is important to note that a number of potentially relevant criteria were not used to recruit and screen participants, although many of these surfaced as discussion topics during the focus groups.** For example, other than the requirement that participants be over the age of 18, we did not group women according to their ages. We did not seek a specific income or educational level, nor did we ask about employment status during the abusive relationship.

(However, it should be noted that women in the groups represented a variety of income levels and a mix of women who were and were not employed outside the home.) We did not ask about whether or not participants had children, or about their marital status. We did not ask about violence within the participant's family of origin or about specific characteristics of her abuser. During recruiting and screening, we did not differentiate between women who had been in one abusive relationship or several such relationships, nor did we obtain information on the duration or sequence of the abusive relationship within her history of relationships. As noted above, we asked about physical violence, but we did not obtain information prior to the focus group discussion about the severity, duration, or exact nature of the abuse.

One hundred and sixty-eight (168) women participated in the study. They ranged in age from 18 to 60, and reported being out of the abusive relationship from six months to 25 years. Rural women comprised 45 percent of respondents (n = 76) ; urban women comprised 55 percent of respondents (n = 92). Fifty three (53) percent of participants were African-American; 47 percent were Caucasian.

The recruiting strategy for this study depended on local coordinators, who were hired to identify community gatekeepers (such as shelter directors, counselors who worked with abused women, religious leaders, and women's organizations). After obtaining permission from a contact person in each organization, the coordinators placed fliers in social service agencies, community colleges, clinics, beauty salons, women's restrooms, and any setting where adult women might gather. In several instances, additional recruiting methods were used. In rural Georgia, newspaper ads were used to increase the potential visibility of the recruiting message. In Atlanta, an electronic bulletin board message about the focus groups that was posted at Emory University yielded several calls from college students, graduate students, and staff. In Portland, fliers were mailed to volunteers at an abused women's hotline-many of whom had been drawn to this particular volunteer work because they had experienced intimate partner violence in the past. It should be noted that in all groups, participants were motivated to enroll and participate because they thought that their experiences could help other women.

A copy of the recruiting flier is provided in Appendix B. The flier emphasized that the study targeted women and specified the physical nature of the violence. ("Have you ever been hit, slapped, punched, or kicked by your partner?") In addition, the fliers described incentives for participation ($40 in cash and a small gift) as well as steps to make participation as convenient and safe as possible, including free child care, help with transportation, and complete confidentiality. The fliers described a general area of town where focus groups would be held, to emphasize that they would be near public transportation and to help women gauge whether or not the location was convenient for them. However, the fliers never listed the exact location of the focus group discussions; because of safety considerations, this information was only provided to participants who met the screening criteria and planned to attend.

The recruiting in small rural communities in Georgia and Pennsylvania was difficult, especially among African-American women. The recruitment difficulties in rural communities were compounded by the fact many people knew one another and were reluctant to bring up "old business." However, we were able to take advantage of the fact that people knew each other in rural communities by having the local recruiter individually contact women who met the study criteria. This approach provided credibility for the study among potential participants. This personal contact, along with assurances of confidentiality, resulted in well-attended groups. In both Waycross and Douglasville, Georgia, the recruitment process yielded one focus group each. Nonetheless, the focus group responses from the single session in these communities yielded similar information to the rest of the groups, indicating that selection bias did not occur.

Screening

The fliers listed local telephone numbers for women to call to participate. Women calling the local coordinators' telephone numbers were asked a series of questions to determine whether or not they met the study criteria and, if so, which group they should attend (Caucasian or African-American). These included questions about their age range, race/ethnicity, and when they had last experienced a violent relationship (or violence in the relationship). If they met these study criteria, they were then asked whether they could attend the focus group discussion on a particular date and whether they needed child care or transportation assistance. (See Appendix C for screening questions.)

The local coordinators recorded information about each caller on a log sheet and maintained a waiting list once the number of participants exceeded the nine slots allocated to each group. One unique challenge in screening abused women was protecting their privacy while confirming their attendance at the group-particularly for those who were still in the relationship. During the screening call, women were asked where and how it would be safest to contact them to confirm attendance, and whether messages could be left on their answering machines. Regardless of how safe the women felt in contacting the recruiters, all of the materials sent to them were generic (e.g., "Thank you for agreeing to attend our meeting on Tuesday at 7:30 p.m.). In addition, messages left on answering machines or with other family members who answered the participants' telephones never referred to the nature of the discussion.

Focus Group Locations

As noted in Exhibit I, focus groups were held in 9 locations across the country:

- Atlanta, Georgia
- Waycross, Georgia
- Douglasville, Georgia
- Chicago, Illinois
- Peoria, Illinois*
- Portland, Oregon
- Eugene, Oregon*
- Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
- Uniontown, Pennsylvania.

*Recruited from surrounding rural areas

In the urban areas and some of the rural areas, the focus groups were held in professional focus group facilities. These offered the advantages of built-in microphones, one-way mirrors for observation, waiting areas for participants, kitchens for food preparation and services, and adjacent rooms for child care. However, these facilities were not available in some of the smaller rural settings. In these cases, the focus groups were held in hotel break rooms, community centers, and churches. While these did not offer some of the amenities of professional facilities (particularly for audio taping and observation), their key advantage was that they were familiar to the women attending the groups.

Focus Group Procedures and Content

Two trained moderators-one Caucasian and one African-American-conducted all of the focus groups. Although the focus group moderators were skilled in focus group research techniques, a one-day orientation session was arranged to familiarize them with the study and its research goals, as well as the unique dynamics of intimate partner violence.

During the orientation session, the moderators became familiar with the focus group discussion guide.

The sequence of questions and activities outlined in the guide was structured to set the stage for the discussion, making the women feel comfortable before addressing the emotional content. It then concluded with messages to other abused women and society. The concluding activities gave participants time to compose themselves, focus on others, and prepare to leave. The guide addressed:

- Introduction and welcome
- Review of study goals
- Review of focus group ground rules (e.g., speaking clearly and one at a time)
- Review of informed consent document (see Appendix D)
- Ice-breaker/warm-up question about what friends and families cherish about them, or where they get their health information
- Specific questions about:
    - definitions of violent and abusive relationships
    - early warning signs of violence
    - triggers to violence
    - why women stay in violent relationships
    - what makes or helps women decide to end the violence
    - what and who supports them in ending the violence
    - barriers to leaving the relationship or ending the violence
    - what would help women move through the process of change more easily
    - advice to women who had been hit for the first time
    - what could be done at different stages to end the violence
    - what women know now that they wish they had known earlier

- messages to other women
- messages to society

- Closing

In addition to the discussions prompted by specific questions, participants were asked to complete a brief-card sorting exercise. At this point in the discussion, the moderator handed each participant a stack of cards. Each card listed a different adjective; several blank cards were included in the stack so that participants could choose adjectives that were not on the list. Participants were asked to sort the cards into piles or a spectrum that described how they felt before or early in the relationship, during the violence, and once the violence had ended.

ADJECTIVE CARDS

afraid	lonely
angry	not myself
calm	optimistic
cleat	scared
confident	steady
confused	strong
depressed	successful
desperate	tense
failure	unhappy
frustrated	unsure
happy	weak
hopeful	worried
hopeless	

The purpose of this exercise was two-fold. First, it provided a break in the often emotional discussion and disclosure, allowing women to do something quietly and privately while the moderator left the room. In addition, the cards gave women a way to describe the stages and process of change they had undergone during and after the relationship. As each woman described her choices, the key information was not necessarily in the choice of cards-which were similar across groups-but in the specific memories and revelations they triggered. These are described in greater detail below, in the summary of findings.

Even with extensive backgrounds in group facilitation, the moderators were faced with an unusual level of emotional disclosure, including tears and anger. In addition, many of the participants had undergone some form of group or individual counseling, which presented additional challenges when participants revealed their stories in a therapeutic mode, rather than in response to specific questions.

Two problems arose during the data collection process. First, in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, the tape player's recording function was defective. Highly detailed notes were taken in lieu of a recording of the discussion. Secondly, one of the focus groups in Eugene, Oregon experienced **a** similar problem with recording devices; only the first and last part of the conversations were recorded, and the failure of the tape player was not detected until the focus group was complete.

After the focus group discussion, participants received $40 stipends, certificates of appreciation from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Family and Intimate Violence Prevention Team, and modest gifts.

Data Analysis Procedures

Transcription Process

The focus group discussions were taped in their entirety. The tapes were then labeled and sent to a transcriber, who transcribed the discussions word-for-word, noting muffled conversations, where several people talked at once, and where it was difficult to distinguish exactly what was said. The resulting transcripts, discs, and tapes were reviewed for accuracy by the research team. Names and other identifying information were removed from the final transcripts. Printed versions were then made and copied for distribution to all team members and for the CDC team. The transcripts yielded an average of 100 pages per group.

Analysis Team

The analysis team was comprised of researchers of differing ethnicity and disciplines. Members of the team were trained in public health, behavioral sciences, sociology, and public policy. Frequent meetings were conducted to develop standardized mechanisms and approaches to analyzing the data.

Working with the Data

Developing the Codebook. The codebook defined and listed major categories derived from the questions in the discussion guide and from a review of intimate partner violence literature. Within-

category codes emerged fi-om the literature describing types of violence, risk and protective factors for partner abuse, and contextual analyses of violence by male partners, as well as from the range of responses to the moderator questions in the focus groups. After reviewing each of the transcripts, the team modified the codebook by collapsing codes that were duplicative. The codebook, describing the 220 codes used, can be found in Appendix E.

Selection of Software. Tally, a "shareware" program available through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, was chosen as the software program best suited to our data management and analysis needs. Tally is described as a "text analysis tool for the liberal arts," which allows one to mark narrative text with mnemonics, group it into segments, and produce reports based on the codebook. Searching, cutting and pasting, and commentary functions are easily performed, all without the original text document being altered, which is vital when more than one researcher is working on the same files. Tally has a ceiling of 255 total possible codes.

Data Management. Due to file size limitations, each focus group transcript was split into two parts to perform the analyses. We split each at the same point in the moderator guide for consistency, and named each file with acronyms marking the state, geography (urban or rural), ethnicity, time, and whether or not it was the first or second half of the transcript.

Coding of ***Transcripts.*** Coding the transcripts was an intensive process because of the length of the transcripts and internal checking procedures that were built into the data analysis process. At every stage of coding, each transcript was read by at least two reviewers for inter-rater reliability. The transcripts were divided into two groups, each with the same number of rural/urban and Caucasian/African-American groups to eliminate potential bias in coding. The first reviewer read each group of transcripts, followed by a second reviewer who commented when opinions about a code differed. Daily meetings of the coding team were held to resolve any differences in coding choices. Finally, a third reviewer checked the transcript for accuracy before entering the codes in Tally.

Data Entry. Tally inserts codes over the text in a separate data file. Therefore, the data files are small, containing only the codes and the location of the text for each. When entering or editing

codes, the data file is superimposed onto the original text file. Codes were entered by bracketing off text and selecting the appropriate code(s) from the mnemonic set. For example:

> *[. . .Because you know that there's, you know, there has been something out there*
> ***shells***
> *that, that's been provoking that person and so you're walking on eggshells because*
> *you know it's coming, but you don 't know when.]*

After each transcript was coded in Tally, a reviewer double checked for misspelled codes, erroneous markings, and brackets that were not "closed."

Data Analysis. The analyses were run by ethnicity-location categories and divided in half to create eight major batches, two for each category:

- African-American urban groups (A and B files)
- African-American rural groups (A and B files)
- Caucasian urban groups (A and B files)
- Caucasian rural groups (A and B files)

We were able to perform counts of all of the codes used in each group and compare them across groups. We asked for occurrences of a code or a group of codes by batches or by individual files. For instance, using the same example as above, every occurrence of "shells" across all transcripts could be printed in a single report.

The analysis process was staged as follows:

1. The first set of analyses performed consisted of **mnemonic percentages,** or the number of times each code was used in each group. This was done to identify patterns and to identify the frequency of codes in each group and across groups. Although we were interested in the dominant themes, we paid as much attention to codes that did not appear as frequently, in order to understand nuances in the data. Often these outliers were illustrative of a different experience or provided greater understanding of a process.

2. The next set of analyses was performed on each **major category of codes** reflecting the questions in the moderator guide, such as "early warning signs" and "triggers to violence." Within each section, certain types of responses clustered. Therefore, when creating data reports of group occurrences of codes, we selected those that appeared to be associated for inclusion in the same data report. For example, within the section of early warning signs, many women talked about their own family and relationship history of abuse, as well as their partner's. In this case, five codes were reported together to identify patterns related to history of abuse: her family history of violence, her abusive relationship history, his family history of violence, his abusive relationship history, and his history of multiple marriages.

3. To analyze the **responses to questions in the moderator guide, we** assigned each section to one team member, who then became the "lead" on these data. This procedure created a depth of understanding of the category of responses, emerging themes, and outliers. Frequent meetings were held to discuss findings, receive team feedback, examine the differences found between groups, and explore research and intervention implications.

Stages of Change Analysis: This analysis consisted of sorting the relevant transcript quotes into the five stages and ten processes of the Transtheoretical Model. Particular attention was paid to the sections "Why Stay?" and "Why Leave?' to discern the shift in decisional balance. These re-sorted categories were reviewed for a content analysis of themes. The adjective cards were sorted similarly. As described below, this methodology was effective in identifying the adjacent stages of preparation and action that differs from applications of this model to addiction.

The next section presents our findings in each of the following categories:

- early warning signs of abusive relationships
- why women stay in violent relationships
- why women leave violent relationships
- the role other relationships and institutions play in this decision
- what women wish they had known or had while in their violent relationships
- advice to women now in abusive relationships and to society at large
- implications for the Transtheoretical Model.

. . .all I could hear was the bleeding. I did not fee/ at first.

Violence, it's that aura of sensing your controls,
smelling it, getting the taste of it, sipping, smelling your aspiration.
The terror that is in your stomach,
the release of your, in, in, of our insides.. .
As this process...as your fight for personal survival continues. It's the defense of who you are due to wrongs you have endured continually.

African-American rural woman, Illinois

NATURE OF VIOLENCE

Women in this study confirm what other research has taught us about the nature of intimate partner violence. While the violence itself is detrimental and destructive, it is often not as damaging as the effect it creates-paralysis, impairment of the ability to evaluate options, and a nagging guilt that if only she could *"do it right"* the violence would stop. The constant and unpredictable nature of the threat combined with escalating and increasingly lethal physical violence creates an atmosphere of terror, intimidation, and insecurity. This combination establishes the desired power and control of the male partner.

*The **constant and unpredictable nature of the threat** combined with **escalating** and **increasingly lethal** violent **acts** against her creates a state of constant vigilance. Across all groups, women talked about **"walking on eggshells."***

Contributing to the atmosphere of violence is a wide range of abuse. Emotional abuse-belittling, degradation, shame, threats, control, manipulation, infidelity, and acts of terror-is constant, even when there is a hiatus from physical abuse. In particular, he blames her for anything that goes wrong and chips away at her self-esteem, allowing self-doubt to creep in. Over time, this leads to self-blame so that women begin to believe that they deserve the abuse.

The emotional battering is exacerbated by acts of intimidation and terror, violating a woman's personal space and sense of safety and wearing her down. Women describe actions such as breaking into her apartment, running her off the road, waking her up throughout the night, or kidnaping her at knife point. They also describe intimidating acts such as cutting the TV cord when she said she did not want to change the TV channel, cutting up her clothes and mattress, destroying wedding gifts and all the personal belongings that had meaning to her, blatantly having affairs with other women, cutting the electricity off in her house, and picking up her daughter while sleeping and leaving the child where the mother would not know her whereabouts. They continue: slashing her car tires; repeatedly tearing the phone out of the wall so she is unable to call

for help; throwing away her school books, her daughter's books and scrap books, taking her kitten by the tail and swinging it against the wall, and even throwing their baby out of the crib.

The climate of violence in abused women's homes is described in their own words:

Harassing	*Raging out of control*
Criticizing	*Hitting and badgering*
Feeling of being trapped	*Isolating you*
The pains	*Soreness*
Fear	*Belittling*
Terror, terrorizing	*Humiliating you*
It's your fault, everything	*Stifling*

Stalking, a particularly terrifying form of emotional abuse was experienced by women at all stages of their relationship. One respondent describes:

> *I remember one night, I'd always* **try** *to get all my groceries before I went into the house that night* **so I wouldn't** *have to come back out, cause after I put him out, he was still stalking me. And I remember one night I forgot to get bread, and I* **sat** *on the floor and cried because I was too scared to go outside and get bread.*
>
> ***African-American urban woman, Georgia***

The physical abuse portrayed included slapping, hitting, punching, kicking, choking, throwing, pushing, and assault with keys, scissors, knives, and guns. A number of women described forced sex that included unwanted and nonconsensual sex with them as they slept: beating her if she declined to have intercourse, accusing the woman of having sex with someone else and then forcing her to have intercourse with him, and for one woman, raping her and subsequently denying the parentage of their youngest son.

Descriptions of physical violence included brutal and debasing acts:

- pouring lighter fluid on her and setting her on fire in front of her son
- throwing her out of cars or making her jump out of windows
- picking her up by the neck while pregnant and beating her in front of the children
- kicking her down the stairs when she was pregnant, causing her baby to be born two months prematurely
- as she was battling cancer, slapping her so hard that her wig flew off

- beating her black and blue with a baseball bat because she wouldn't change the television channel
- shooting her in the back with a BB gun that he pumped 20 times
- beating her after she came home from the hospital with their child delivered by a Caesarian section
- choking her in front of his brother

The **constant and unpredictable nature of the threat** combined with **escalating** and **increasingly lethal** violent acts against her creates a state of constant vigilance. Across all groups, women talked about **"walking on eggshells."** They searched for the magic formula that would enable them to end the violence. They prepared special meals, hushed the children, and dressed a certain way, said "*I love* you" when their men came in the door, only to be beaten because they did not say *"I love* you" exactly the way their men wanted to hear it. The descriptions of *"walking on eggshells,"* *"crossing a minefield,"* *"constantly worrying,"* or, as one woman said, *"the Double T: torment and terror"* suggest that these women were in a persistent "*fight or flight"* arousal state. This unrelenting vigilance led to exhaustion and the inability to do much more than try to anticipate and avoid the next assault. As described by one woman:

> ***It's so demoralizing to be treated that way that you lose perspective. It's like being held hostage...you feel like you are because it's so destructive of your, your own peace of mind...***
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman, Georgia***

I don't know whaf he was gonna do
cause you never knew what was gonna trigger him off,
whether it was a word
or something you didn't do
or didn't say
or didn't ha ve on
or whatever it was.

African-American urban woman, Pennsylvania

TRIGGERS TO VIOLENCE

When asked if they could identify triggers to the violence, women agreed that because of the pervasive threat her partner poses and his unrelenting attempts to control her, **anything** was a trigger. As one woman said, *"It was anytime, any, anytime, anyplace."* Women describe situations where their partners tried to create or provoke situations that resulted in violence. Often during the battering, he blamed her for the attack with comments such as *"I'm doing this for your own good'* or *"Look what you made me do!"*

An argument, a jealous moment, a noisy child, or a bad day at work resulted in a battering. Abusers assigned their partners responsibility for their emotional state and used them to vent their frustration with the accumulation of daily stressors. Women described how their partners channeled all feelings about others into aggression toward them over:

- jealousy
- financial worries
- men's guilt over being with another woman
- beating the woman because his child (from a relationship with another woman) died when he was with her
- beating her when she came home early from work and found him in bed with the landlord
- *"bringing you back down"* when she achieved more financially or educationally than he

As one woman concluded, *"instead of feeling theirproblems, they take it out on you."*

The second most common response to the question of triggers to violence was **his substance abuse.** Often women described events that triggered their partners' drinking and led to violence. Over and over, women painted the picture of alcohol or drugs loosening the men's inhibitions to aggression. A Caucasian urban woman from Oregon described the destructive combination of rage, alcohol, and his family history of abuse:

> ***You know, he'd be happy. There were times when he would be*** **in a** ***really good mood and*** **then** ***a couple*** **minutes** ***later he would just go crazy, you know, flip out. Urn, he has a*** **severe** ***problem with alcohol and with this anger management. I believe a lot of it comes from, a lot of his anger comes from his childhood.***

During the relationship, women seemed confused about drinking and violence, often believing that drinking (that leads to violence) was the problem. For many years, their efforts were aimed at changing the drinking behavior.

However salient the combination of substance abuse and aggression, it was clear from all the focus group respondents that substance abuse was not necessary to incite violence. His work, a holiday, a crisis, children, finances, suggestions on her part, and pregnancy were all reported as triggers of violence. One difference observed between groups was that African-American urban women made greater reference to violence occurring when she "stood up to" or talked back to him. Throughout the study, however, the similarities across groups were striking.

. . . trying to keep you a way from your friends and family,
wants to be with you every moment,
follows you, checks up on your whereabouts,
presses for commitment quickly,
comes in real strong very ear/y in the relationship,
and sort of a Jekyll and Hyde, extreme attention
and then temper flare and then extreme apology

Caucasian urban woman, Georgia

EARLY WARNING SIGNS

When asked to reflect on early warning signs of an abusive relationship, the focus groups participants richly elaborated a range of early warning signs-ones that seemed obvious to them in retrospect. However, these women also described many reasons why the early warning signs were not obvious to them in the early stages of the relationship. They articulated **a subtle, incremental, and accelerating process of power and control** that required a highly-tuned radar and early warning system to be noticed. They also stated that a woman's radar must detect these signs before she is deeply in the relationship, when logistical and emotional ties make it difficult to move on. Children, emotional involvement, and financial dependence on her partner reduced their degrees of freedom. They emphasized that individual acts do not necessarily set off warnings, however, later they may see a pattern given the cumulative effects of his behavior. They also noted an **inherent contradiction** between establishing intimacy in a relationship and being vigilant for early warning signs of violence.

Early Warning Signs

- Her Characteristics
- His Characteristics
- How He Treats Others
- How He Treats Her
- Features of the Relationship

Early Warning Signs: Her Characteristics

The risk factors that women brought to a relationship clouded the radar or early warning signals or, in many cases, prevented them from even knowing to be alert. This radar was "*off*" in the early stages of a relationship formation that:

- was romantic and idyllic
- fulfilled her dreams of marriage and family
- made her feel special, loved, and worthy
- removed her from an abusive home situation

Some of the women described **gravitating to him,** specifically to the danger and excitement he posed. Some women perceived a magnetic quality even when intellectually they knew the men were not right for them.

His, the sound of his voice scared me. And he was scary *lookin' too and I* still went *for it..../ liked him, you know, like drew me. like she said, like drew* me *in. I don't know if it's the roughness or the machoism or the voice or whatever... The excitement, the excitement. Challenge, challenge.*

African-American urban woman, Pennsylvania

Other factors such as **her family history of violence or substance abuse** make it particularly difficult to distinguish troubling behavior at the start of the relationship because her own boundaries and self-esteem have been violated and blurred from childhood. This is chillingly described:

I bet if we all had a survey here of how many of us were abused as children and grew up in that environment, 9 out of 10 of us would raise our hand and *say, 'I've been disassociating since I* was *6 months old.' And so it's a regular pattern that you're used to. It doesn't,* it *doesn't seem unfamiliar and I think, I think an abuser can see* a *victim, you know, I think it, it's almost like being groomed when you're a child...*

Caucasian urban woman, Oregon

I call *them generational curses.*

African-American urban woman, Georgia

I know nothing about boundaries, absolutely nothing. I had been violated *by every* man *my mother ever lived with, sexually abused, and including my own father and, and I think through all of that I had learned* that *I discounted any* amount *of discernment I ever had and that's what I wished I'd known then that my discernment was valid and I didn't listen.*

Caucasian rural woman, Oregon

As Bell Hooks[3] describes, one aspect of becoming intimate is that women often share the framework of their childhood pains, especially during relationship formation, and this may determine how men respond later in difficult situations. Hooks maintains that these revelations provide a detailed blueprint for anyone who wishes to wound or hurt a vulnerable woman.

Another risk factor is **pervasive violence in women's homes and communities.** When violence characterizes her milieu-in the streets, in the homes and the relationships of family and friends, and in her own home-she does not have a point of reference to set limits on behavioral precursors or identify early warning signs. Below is an interchange from one group of urban African-

[3]Hooks, Bell. (1989) ***Talking Back: Thinking feminist, thinking Black.*** South End Press, Boston, Massachusetts.

American women in Pennsylvania, all of whom experienced violence at home and in their communities:

Moderator: ***Did anybody else see it growing up?***

Participant: ***Oh, yes,***
Participant: ***Yes.***
Participant: ***Yeah.***

Moderator: ***In your own, in your own home?***

Participant: ***Yes,***
Participant: ***Oh, yeah***
Participant: ***I pulled a knife on a step-father of mine and told him you'll die*** **or 1'11** ***die...***
Participant: ***Yeah***
Participant: ***Yes***

Indeed, many of the women in the focus groups thought they **deserved the abuse,** that it was a measure of the man's love for her, and that violence was happening in every household.

> ***. ..as*** **women** ***a lot of the ladies grow up when you're living in an abusive household too, and ah, marry and date guys that are abusive; it's just because it's like a thing where you don't know any different, you know, you expect, you know what I'm*** **saying,** ***it's like this is what you expect.***
>
> ***African-American urban woman, Georgia***

Many of these relationships occur when a woman is still an adolescent, one **who does not have the perspective and experience to recognize or evaluate early warning signs of abuse.** They believe their men will save them from the painful present.

> ***Yeah, that Prince Charming syndrome. When he comes along and*** **sort** ***of*** **rescues you and** ***takes you off into the sunset.***
>
> ***African-American rural woman from Georgia***

She also brings a bruised sense of self-worth, low self-efficacy, and, often, a history of relationship failures. Previous relationships may also have been emotionally or physically abusive.

Finally, each item described as an early warning sign also occurs in many relationships that are not violent. However, **the degree, the escalation, and the constellation of behavior and attitudes** are key to setting off alarms about the danger of this relationship.

Table I lists the early warning signs identified by focus group participants. They are presented in descending order, from the most frequently mentioned to the least frequently mentioned early warning signs. Again, the less frequently mentioned signs may seem less obvious, but still play a role in helping women recognize a pattern of power and control.

Early warning signs described below by the focus group participants clustered into four categories:

- his characteristics
- how he treats others
- how he treats her
- features of the relationship

Early Warning Signs: His Characteristics

The early warning sign reported most frequently by these women was **control.** Women reported and characterized control in numerous ways, as described below. The effect of control on the woman was devastating:

> ***The value system that you have in place for yourself is compromised to the point, whether it is systematic*** **or** ***whether it is, you know, all at once. Things that you would never believe that you would ever do*** **or** ***accept or tolerate are just vacated*** **completely. And** ***urn, I was a totally different person before*** **that** ***relationship and I'm a totally different person after that relationship. And it was*** **very** ***hard to reclaim myself.***
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman,*** **Georgia**

The focus group participants characterized the spiraling control in myriad ways. They described **possessiveness and jealousy** early in the relationship. The possessiveness was manifested by isolating her from family and friends and insisting that things be done his way. His wanting her to himself is often seen as positive, at first.. His desire to spend more time together is attractive until she realizes she is no longer seeing friends and family. The effect of possessiveness and extreme jealousy was to mold or shape her behavior and it contributed to her sense of needing to "walk on eggshells." This molding process was a critical form of control.

Exhibit II

Mnemonic Order of Early Warning Signs

- control *+
- her family history of abuse
- his substance abuse
- isolation
- charming
- his family history of abuse
- blames others
- jealous +
- critical .
- insecure
- his relationship history of emotional and physical abuse and relationship failure
- tests her limits *
- his temper
- stalking her
- Jekyll-Hyde behavior on extreme poles of charm and kindness as well as brutality
- misogynist .
- her relationship history
- no warning signs
- infidelity *
- wants his own way
- remorseful of wrongdoings
- rage
- noncommunicative
- parental disapproval ✦
- whirlwind romance +•
- jokes about abuse .
- abuses animals .
- owns weapons .
- rough with her

LEGEND

Reported more frequently:
* African-American women
Caucasian women
+ Urban women
✦ Rural women

I've learned you can, you can find out after the first date, you know, the first date is usually wonderful. The next date he's trying to already change you into what he wants.

Caucasian rural woman, Illinois

Telling you how to dress, how to wear your hair, how to wear your make-up, how to walk, all that.

African-American rural woman, Georgia

He was trying to keep me to himself. He never wanted me to go anywhere...It was always about him, never about us. Never about me, you know, me and the kids. It was all about him, what he wanted. 'I want things done this way.'

African-American urban woman, Illinois

Insecurity, clingyness mistrust, and accusations were other warning signs. The man declared to her, *"If you leave, I'll kill myself;" "I couldn 't live without you," "I just know you 'II leave someday,"* or the degrading remark, *"You 're no darn good, but I need you anyway."* The mistrust and accusations sometimes took particularly startling forms:

I was nine months pregnant at my sister's wedding. Due any moment with my oldest daughter. And she said, you know, all the wedding party's got to get into the limo and go for a ride. He accused me of being with the groomsman. Having sex with him!

Caucasian urban woman, Georgia

. ..Forced sex, yes it is disgusting. If you say 'no,' they say 'are you getting it somewhere else?'

African-American rural woman, Pennsylvania

The effect of this systematic control was an erosion of her sense of self and inability to judge a situation.

You know, that's really odd that you doubt what you know.

Caucasian urban woman, Georgia

Slowly he tries to cut everything away from you that makes you yourself.

African-American rural woman, Pennsylvania

As the efforts to control the women escalated, **noncommunication and intimidation** were used as ways to dominate her.

And then when they call you're just sitting there holding the phone. *I* mean there is no *conversation, nothing. they're just holding the phone. Why did you call? Just to see where* I *was at? To* hear me *breathe?*

African-American urban woman, Georgia

Certain times *I thought, I feels like I* was *in the military.*

African-American rural woman, Illinois

Early Warning Signs: How He Treats Others

Women identified warning signs that include his **joking about violence against women** and making **degrading and debasing comments about women,** including his mother and sisters. This was particularly true of the Caucasian participants.

There is *signs out* there that *they do. There is signals that guys give out. Because one of the guys that I was dating for a while, we were watching a program* on *TV and here was this fight. He just piped in and said, 'Slap the bitch and get if over with.' Right there is a sign* right *there. He would hit* me *if we got info if....So there is signs* out *there of, you know, they're there. You've just got to learn to pick them up.*

Caucasian rural woman, Oregon

Women described another warning sign that underscored his inability to take responsibility for his actions: **blaming others and blaming her** for everything that went wrong. Many men blamed their partners for the abuse they inflicted, telling the women it was their fault and proclaiming, *"Look what* you *made* me *do!"* When he blamed her for problems in his life, he was further controlling her with guilt and confusion.

Inability to take any type of responsibility for his behavior, regardless of what happened, I mean, in the world, if was always somebody else's fault. It was *either my fault or the world or this person or that situation. I mean nothing in this universe has ever been the man's fault.*

Caucasian rural woman, Oregon

You know, no *matter, no matter how* wrong they are, *they gonna always twist it around and then they* blame it *on you.*

Caucasian rural *woman, Georgia*

Always had a low opinion of everybody else and build himself on a pedestal. So and I said, you know, I said why he always, you know, degrading other people and he thinks he is so much better, you know, than others. So then in time it just turned on me. So I was like those other people he degraded.

African-American urban woman, **Georgia**

The **nature of his previous relationships** was another warning sign identified by the focus group participants. They underscored that key information in relationship formation was knowing how and why he left his previous relationships and whether he was abusive to other women. Participants also described his **holding grudges,** against old girlfriends often described in especially violent language, as a warning sign.

A few women maintained that if he was **cruel to animals,** it was more likely that he would be cruel to people. One woman from Oregon noted,

"My husband was very controlling of animals and just so proud that he could control that animal. And he's probably proud **that** *he could control* **a** *person* **also."**

A key early warning sign described by the focus groups participants was **his family history of abuse.** An African-American rural woman from Illinois summarized this: *"...It has a lot to do with what they have seen, what they have been around, what they have been submitted to."* Often, this damaging family history contributed to her sense that he was a victim and that she should feel sorry for him. The participants concluded that pitying him or believing he was a victim was a poor foundation for a relationship.

Early Warning Signs: How He Treats Her

One of the focus group participants' most consistent descriptions of men who abuse women was **"charming."** The man was charming to her at the beginning of the relationship and often charmed her friends and family. His charm made it very hard to be persuaded that his troubling behavior was problematic.

I was extremely confused because this man was just incredible **on the** *outside world.*

Caucasian *urban woman, Georgia*

The charm he exhibited consistently at the beginning of the relationship became unpredictable and sporadic as the relationship progressed, and instead she experienced him as a sort of ***"Jekyll and Hyde."*** One moment he would be loving, approachable, and warm, and the next he would be tormenting and torturing her-the "*Double T*," as described by one woman.

> ***And not on/y that, but when the relationship starts, when the relationship first starts it's like your white knight has stepped into your life, and then this venom starts coming out slowly but surely.***
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman, Georgia***

Often the first sign of this Jekyll and Hyde transformation was on or shortly after major life events, such as their wedding day or during her pregnancy.

> ***Seems like they change once you say, 'I do.' /t's like you belong to them or something because you're carrying their name around. That, you know, you're supposed to do what they say.***
>
> ***African-American urban woman,* Georgia**

> ***. ..and there was* a *monster here. Yeah, yeah, and it wasn't the guy I married the night before, you know.***
>
> ***African-American urban woman, Pennsylvania***

> ***They wait. You get married or you get close. They have to catch you. So therefore they treat you right and talk to you right and do everything right, and then the minute they think they've gotcha, then their words start changing a little bit at a time.***
>
> ***Caucasian rural woman, Illinois***

Women in the groups described the insidious and intensifying emotional and physical violence once the abuser feels his power over her is slipping:

> ***What I think like, I think the early sign* was *when he was trying to keep me in the house, didn't want me to associate with my friend because, umm, that's when he was being* a *control freak* then, *and you know, then after that wasn't working, then that's when, I think that's* when you *move up to the higher level and he'd start thinking that he can slap me around to keep you know, whatever...***
>
> ***African-American urban woman, Illinois***

One of the most deleterious outcomes of exercising control is to **isolate** women from their family and networks. Women lose both a sense of perspective and a support system as their abusers repeatedly isolate them.

> **Another thing *they do is* they alienate you *from your friends and family.* *They* want you alone *or all to themselves.***
>
> **Caucasian *urban woman, Illinois***

> ***Hitting, cursing at you* all *the time, yelling, choking, kicking in the* house *all the time,* not *letting you talk to anyone about this.***
>
> ***African-American rural woman, Illinois***

> ***[You're a] prisoner in your own home.***
>
> ***African-American rural woman, Pennsylvania***

Explosive behavior and rage, especially over mundane issues, was another early warning sign described especially by Caucasian women. A hair-trigger **temper,** they maintain, should be a signal to women of potential violence.

> ***I, I can remember one time we went on a date and we were at a very nice restaurant and I knocked over* the *glass of water. He came unglued and he, you know, I should, it should have been* a *huge red* flag cause *right, I, we* were *only dating and he called me stupid...***
>
> ***Caucasian rural woman, Oregon***

Focus group participants also described their abusive partners as **hypercritical,** using name-calling and humiliation and often belittling them in front of friends. Nothing the women did, said, or wore was *"good enough"* to satisfy their abusers.

Early Warning Signs: Features of the Relationship

A cluster of warning signs identified by the focus group participants reflects how abusive men deal with the relationship. A number of women underscored that a man should be suspect if he wants to make a commitment very quickly after a first meeting or early in the relationship. Many

described whirlwind romances in which the male partner first tried to gain their confidence, and only then began the process of control. With the lens of past experience, one woman mused, *"That's not real life, you know. It takes time to love somebody."*

A number of women, especially African-American women, described their partners' **testing limits of the relationship** as an early warning sign. A woman from Oregon explained this as testing her at the beginning *"to see what your vulnerability* level *is."* They described this as a man evaluating the parameters of his control and power over a woman, or, as one participant from Oregon described, his test **was** to assess whether she was conditioned to accept abuse.

> ***But each little thing that you accept is adding points on for them. You know what I'm saying? You're, they adding they points and, and they add 'em up and they say to they self, all right, she let me get away with that.***
>
> ***African-American rural woman, Illinois***

> ***I think a lot of times what happens in relationships is we give men license to do what they do sometimes, because they will do a little just to see what they can get away with, and if they get by with that, then they do a little bit more, and then before you know, it escalates and escalates, and then abuse gets worse and worse. So, aah, I think a lot of times, yeah, they do test just to see what you're about.***
>
> ***African-American urban woman, Georgia***

A number of women, especially African-American women, described **infidelity as an** early warning sign. They also remarked on the co-occurrence of infidelity with his abuse of alcohol and drugs. Some men flaunted their infidelity, others coerced the women to remain at home while they pursued other women.

Many women depicted being confused by men's **excessive remorse and honeymoon treatment on the heels of intolerable and horrifying behavior.** They warned that this pattern-abuse followed by remorse and pledges that he would never hurt her again-should be an immediate signal of a chronically abusive relationship.

. . .you start letting go of what your sense of reality is
and what your sense of personhood is
to not deal with the relationship, what's really going on.
The more invested you are the less, at least in my experience,
you're willing to walk away.
And they don't start-boom-right away,
because if it was fast then you wouldn't,
you'd go 'Something is wrong here.'
But you still sort of get hooked into it.

And then you let one little thing go, you think,
'you know, everybody is human.'
You know, don't make a big deal out of it.
You gradually stop kind of checking
into the reality areas of your life
that used to keep you balanced,
used to keep you kind of 'What's going on here?'
And so it's systematic.
It's a little bit at a time and
then by the time you get something is wrong,
you're in it so deep that you can't get out.
At least that's what it feels like.

Caucasian urban woman, Georgia

WHY WOMEN STAY IN VIOLENT RELATIONSHIPS

Women in the focus groups confirmed what previous research about abused women has suggested: that the decision process is far too complex to be reduced to either taking the abuse or leaving it. As one woman stated, *"Your whole world is in chaos completely."* Moreover, in some cases, women may experience an increase in the level of violence or the threat of death upon leaving an abusive partner.

Why Women Stay in Violent Relationships

- Cognitive and emotional determinants
- Perceptions of the relationship and the environment
- Psychological and logistical barriers

The reasons women gave for staying with their abusive partners were strikingly similar, regardless of women's regional and racial differences. In general, there were two types of responses to the question, "*Why stay*?" The first is a positive, hopeful answer, such as holding on to the belief that he will change or viewing him as a good father to the children. The other is more ominous, describing an obstacle to leaving the relationship. Examples include a lack of financial independence or threat that he will kill her or her children. These negative responses alter the framing of the response from *"why I stayed'* to *"why I could not leave."* This distinction is meaningful, especially when developing interventions to target women who vary in terms of their readiness to leave.

None of the participants reported one single motivating factor for staying. Instead, myriad reasons were offered during the discussions. For each woman, there were several categories within the overall list of reasons for staying in the relationship.

- cognitive and emotional determinants
- perceptions of the relationship and the environment
- psychological and logistical barriers

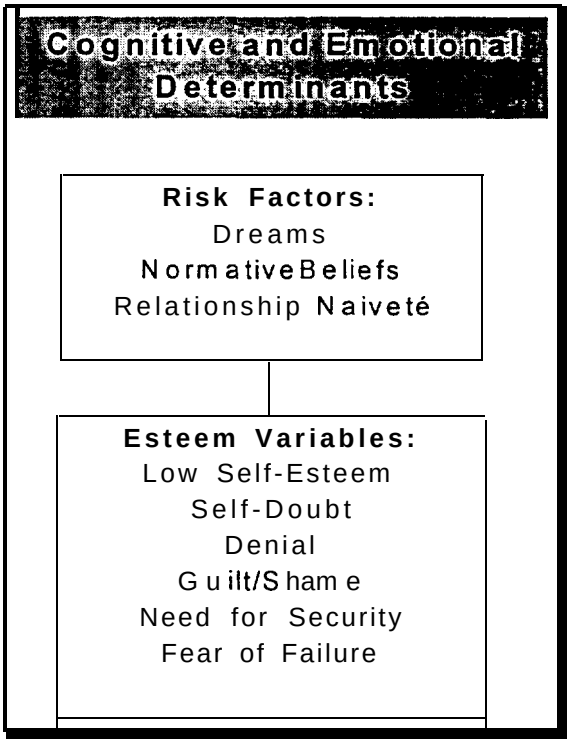
First, in the category of cognitive and emotional determinants, there were **risk factors that she brought to the relationship,** such as normative beliefs and family history of abuse. Her self-esteem and emotional state were considered risk factors, as well. In addition, these were deleteriously affected by the physical and emotional abuse she suffered.

A second category, perception of relationships and the environment, includes her **feelings toward the abuser and the relationship.** These relational issues also included her commitment to marriage vows and to a two-parent family, honeymoon periods (renewing hope after a violent incident), a belief that he would change; and her investment in the relationship. Children were a critical component of the relational issue, yet this issue had its own set of special nuances, described below.

For psychological and logistical barriers, being **trapped in the relationship** was both an emotional and a logistical category, as women feared the repercussions of leaving yet simultaneously felt that there was *"nothing better out there."* At the same time, she and her children were often financially dependent on her partner. It is important to note that while each reason was a significant factor in its own right, they acted in tandem to increase the likelihood that she would remain in the abusive relationship even at great cost to her. This confluence of factors poses **a** great challenge for intervention development.

Cognitive And Emotional Determinants

Every woman brings dreams, past experiences, and expectations to a relationship. For some women, these form a protective shield with respect to the risk of violence within a relationship. In other words, a woman with the right "armor" or "radar" is less likely to enter into a relationship with someone who has abusive tendencies. Perhaps more importantly, if her partner were to become abusive, she would leave immediately. Alternatively, for others, these same factors interact so that a woman may be predisposed to choosing abusive partners or impair her ability to detect and react to the early warning signs of abuse.



Beginning in childhood, women are repeatedly given messages about gender relations and expected role-appropriate behavior. For example, many little girls are told by teachers and other adults that if a boy hits her, pulls her hair, or teases her, it means that he likes her. Parents may reinforce this message through their own physical and emotional behavior. For both the abuser and the victim, family history of abuse is critical in the shaping of **normative beliefs** that affect both the early detection of problem behaviors and the propensity to remain in a violent relationship.

> ***. . .Most of the men grew up in, ahh, violent households and what happens is they, they're just continuing a cycle on because they don't have an understanding of what they're dealing with or how to deal with the person another*** **way because** ***this is all they saw when they*** **were** ***younger and...[they] grow up*** **to** ***be adult batterers.***
>
> ***African-American urban woman, Georgia***

> ***I didn't know actually for a long time because my mother was abused by my father, so to me it was natural... And that went on for quite*** **a** ***few years, until I, I think I matured...***
>
> ***Caucasian*** **rural** ***woman, Oregon***

With a violent upbringing, women may conclude that abuse is a normal facet of intimate relationships. Alternatively, as was particularly discussed by Caucasian participants, women who are not raised in the context of an abusive upbringing, but who experience a series of bad relationships may presume that, in one form or another, all relationships are abusive. An adolescent or young woman with little knowledge of intimate relationships may come to this understanding, as well. As one participant stated, *"...It was the first partner that I lived with. I moved out in my senior year in high school to be with this person."* Regardless of age, however, **relationship naivete** emerged as a compelling risk factor in these focus groups.

In addition, women reported witnessing abuse in their social networks. Several African-American women in one group described a mind set in which women in their circle of friends believed, *"If he doesn't hit you, he doesn't love you."*

> ***. . . When I was in the relationship with him, umm,*** **my** ***friends, I always see my friends and their boyfriends always abuse them so automatically what came to my mind, it was natural you know...and*** **the** ***first time he hit*** **me** ***I was like OK, well my friend got beat up yesterday so I guess it's OK. So, you know, I didn't know any better...***
>
> ***African-American urban woman,*** **Georgia**

Growing up in a traditional home, where the man has ultimate control and the woman submits to his world view, can also be considered a risk factor. With respect to her belief about a woman's role in the home, one woman declared, *"We 're supposed* to *be taken care of."* Related to **gender role stereotypes,** many women expressed a highly romanticized notion of love and of intimate relationships. **Dreams** of the happily-ever-after often kept them hopeful during the violence. Reluctance to give up the dream, the love of their life, or the hope of a Cinderella transformation were consistent themes in all of the groups.

> ***And it was so frustrating to me. I urgently wanted us to be happy. I wanted to* have *kids with him. And I, you know, I totally imagined growing old with him. And yet the bad stuff just kept cropping up.***
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman, Georgia***

For many women, having children elevated the need to work things out and to keep the family together. Several focus group participants who were raised in one-parent homes deeply regretted the absence of the second parent and consequently expressed the need to provide a more stable environment for their children.

Esteem Variables

Also included within cognitive and emotional determinants is the category of esteem variables. **Self esteem** is critical in most areas of behavior theory, but it is especially paramount in the area of intimate partner violence. Focus group participants described a beating down of their sense of self, regardless of whether they entered the abusive relationship with high or low self esteem. While low self esteem can be considered a predisposing factor for intimate partner abuse, it is also a factor that is eroded by physical and emotional abuse, such that women who had high levels of self esteem previously were likely to lose theirs throughout the course of violence. The abusers precipitated and reinforced these downward spirals, which concurrently increased their feelings of power and control. The focus group participants described a constant state of confusion, as their abuser blamed them for the attacks and simultaneously told the woman that only they could love them and give them what they needed.

Eventually:

> ***You're, you're convinced that you're worthless and you can't make it on your own.***
>
> ***Caucasian rural woman, Georgia***

Woven into this tapestry of feelings of worthlessness and dependency are self doubt, guilt, and shame. Caucasian participants, in particular, stated that they began to **doubt themselves** and their view of the world because they were isolated and had no witnesses to corroborate what they experienced. Added to this sense of confusion and doubt were the abuser's claims that she must be "losing *it*" and out of touch with reality.

> ***. ..So you get to the point, the guilt, you think there's something wrong about me, you know, that's causing him to do this. Because he doesn't do it to anyone else. And in the beginning you don't have any witnesses to what is going on so you think you're insane.***
>
> ***Caucasian rural woman, Illinois***

> ***Nobody really knew the extent of the violence until they saw it. And when I say nobody, that includes me. I thought I was just exaggerating. I thought it wasn't really that bad. When I saw the looks on my friends' faces, I realized that it was really going on. I really thought I was overreacting.***
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman, Georgia***

Time and time again, women reported that they were under the impression that they could control his behavior by altering their *own-"I really just thought, if I could be the one to change..."* When they failed, they were left with consuming feelings of **guilt.** Moreover, many women **internalized** the guilt, believing not only that it was their fault, but that they deserved the abuse as well.

> ***. ..angry because I allowed it to happen to myself. I felt that at that time I felt that it was all my fault. Maybe it was something that I said, maybe um, maybe I shouldn't have talked to him that a way. Or you know, something. So I always blamed myself.***
>
> ***African-American urban woman, Georgia***

> ***Because when he hit me I thought that I deserved it because that's what I was told.***
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman, Oregon***

Not surprisingly, women who felt responsible for the abuse and who were isolated from friends and family were reluctant to seek out someone with whom to talk because they felt **ashamed.** Even women who came to recognize that the abuse was *his* problem, were highly sensitized to the societal perception that she was or could have been at fault.

. ..ashamed to tell anybody what **was** *happening, you know, cause I figured I should be able* **to** *handle this by myself.*

African-American urban woman, Pennsylvania

Even thought it's not really my fault, it's still that social stigma that's attached to it.

Caucasian urban **woman,** *Georgia*

Focus group participants also reported that abusers are keenly aware of the women's feelings of shame and used this knowledge to manipulate them. For example, two participants had the following exchange:

Respondent: *. ..It's almost like you're* **protecting** *your family, too.*

Respondent: *And that empowers the abuser. Because they know we're ashamed. And they use that.*

Caucasian urban **woman,** *Oregon*

Frequently, women noted that they denied the extent or danger of abuse as a coping mechanism.

I'm so in love or I'm so into the kids or into him, **or** *that I don't really see what's happening. So the abuse* **or** *the violence of the relationship could've been there* **for** *a long period of time, but all of the sudden* **years** *down the road or months down the road, I see it. But it* **was** *all like you said, there* **was** *already signs of it being there, but I just overlooked it* **because,** *oh I* **can't** *let go of him because he got to be here for the kids.*

African-American urban woman, Georgia

Denial was predominantly mentioned by Caucasian women. They also spoke of covering the abuse up to the outside world. Sharing a story about a friend who was abused, one woman stated, "I *mean, she could get an Academy Award...It's scary because there's nothing out of place to the naked eye."* Several women commented that they never identified with the label "battered woman:"

I couldn't think of myself as a battered woman, and that might be why. I think there is such, ahh, guys will do that. They really mess with your mind.

Caucasian urban woman, Georgia

As alluded to in the quote above, the abusers played a role in their partners' denial, by rationalizing or diminishing the extent of the abusive treatment. One woman said that her partner was good at "rationalizing the irrational." Several women remarked that their partners made comparisons to other relationships, saying things like, *"at least I am not punching you*", or *"at least I am not sleeping with all your friends*," conveying the message that they could be worse off.

Coping with extreme- forms of abuse could take extraordinary forms. After being brutally raped by her partner, one woman reacted by trying to sanitize the surroundings:

> *. ..I pretended like I was asleep through the whole thing. Kind of like I didn't know* what was *going* on. *You know? And* then *I just laid there all night. And when the* sun *came up in the morning I got a bucket of bleach, I bleached everything in the house, I took a hot bath and I said, OK, this didn't happen.*
>
> *Caucasian urban woman, Georgia*

Furthermore, women reported that they hoped that one day their abusers would see the damage they had done:

> *Well you're waiting for no, the abuser, you're waiting for* the *abuser to notice...to notice that they've done this damage to you. To notice that things are not OK... They should at some point see all of this pain they've caused...*
>
> *Caucasian rural woman, Oregon*

Several of the coping mechanisms the women described reflected a desire to keep the relationship going and to avoid being abandoned. **Fear of relationship failure** was a prevalent theme in every group, first in the discussion of *"why stay?"* and then in the discussion of adjective cards. Several women put the onus of the relationship solely on themselves.

> *... Can't you make it work? What's your problem? You've already blown it once, you* know?
>
> *Caucasian* rural *woman, Oregon*

Participants who had been abused as young women, often attributed their tolerance of the abuse to their relationship naivete:

> *... and that's all I knew. You know, that was the first man I was in love with so that's all I knew. He got me young, so that's what made me stay, too.*
>
> *African-American woman, Georgia*

In contrast, older women felt that was their last hope for happiness:

> *I felt that there was no better life. That there* was *no way I could get out of that OK. That um, you know, it's just my last chance* at *love and there it was, you know, souring and poisoning before my very eyes.*
>
> *Caucasian urban woman, Georgia*

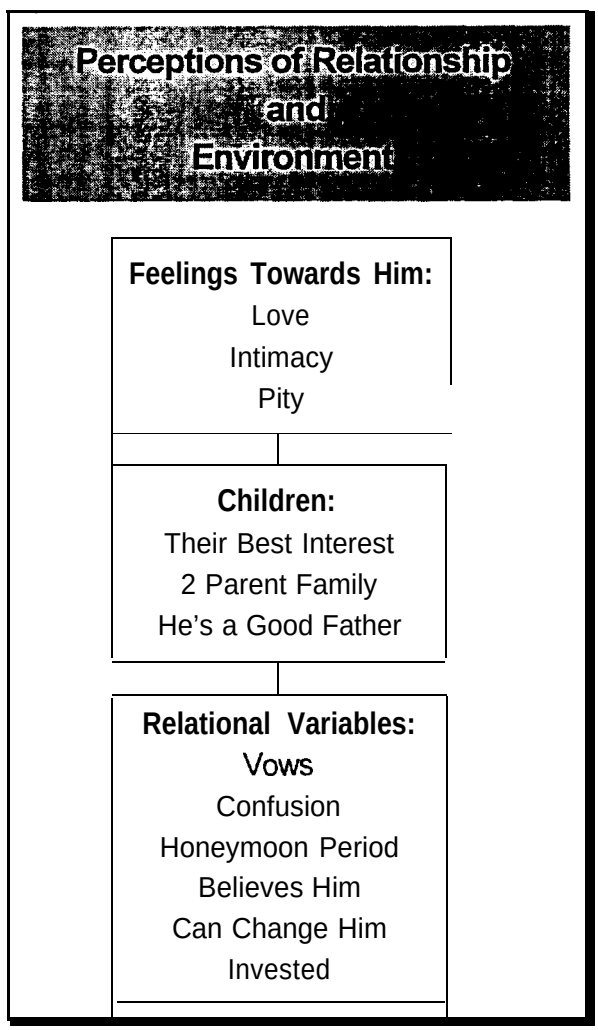
Associated with the fear of relationship failure was the need for **emotional security** and a **fear of being alone.** A number of women stated that while in their abusive relationship, they felt it was

better to have something than nothing. The following quote illustrates one woman's certainty that suffering abuse is a better scenario than being on her own.

> ***It's scarier to get out of it cause you might end up*** **with** ***someone worse. You might end up, God forbid,*** **alone...**
>
> **Caucasian** ***rural woman, Oregon***

Perceptions of the Relationship and Environment

A woman's view of her relationship and environment is dynamic: an ongoing and shifting reflection of the current situation, juxtaposed with her dreams, normative beliefs, and new comparative information from sources outside of the relationship (i.e., friends, family, media, etc). As will be discussed in upcoming sections, changes in perception are important factors in engaging women in an abusive relationship as well as extricating themselves from a violent relationship.



Feelings Towards Him

Though particularly true of African-American participants, the theme of love surfaced in the majority of the focus group discussions. Many women in the groups conveyed **real love and affection for their partners** during the violence and even throughout the full course of the relationship. The following quotes illustrate the strength of their feelings and the effect that love has on their vision of reality.

> ***I mean the wires*** **between** ***love and pain got crossed*** **a** ***long time ago. And*** **somehow** ***my value*** **was** ***wrapped up*** **in** ***if he got it together. And I just loved him enough.***
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman, Georgia***

You love that person very much, and it's very *hard to separate the illness* from *the love that you have. You know he's ill, you know something's wrong with him, but you love him very much, and you wanna keep working with him; you always have this...this hope...*

African-American urban woman, Georgia

Furthermore, her love does not always end upon leaving the relationship, as depicted in this highly charged quote:

Yeah. My friend calls me, she says, 'God I know he's awful and, but I miss him, did you ever miss him? And I said, 'Yeah,' I, I hated him he, I, he wanted to kill me, but I would keep his robe in my *closet, and I would smell it and hold it because he* was *gone, and he* was *always there...*

Caucasian rural woman, Oregon

A theme that emerged more often in African-American groups was that they stayed with their partner because they **enjoyed the sexual relationship.**

And sex makes you *stay.*

African-American rural woman, Illinois

You know I guess sex had a *lot to do with it, too. The sex was fabulous.*

African-American urban woman, Illinois

Feeling **pity** for her partner was a more frequent theme in the Caucasian groups. Several women considered themselves caretakers, who put their men's needs before their own. Others desired to protect or heal their abusive partner from his abusive family. A consistent theme was the idea that the **abusers are victims, too.** As one woman stated:

. . . Nobody loved him in the whole world. That *I had to take care of him because nobody else would do it.*

Caucasian urban woman, Georgia

You cannot be the saving grace of this tortured and tormented soul. You don't even see yourself as a victim. You see them as a victim.

Caucasian urban woman, Georgia

Children

Leaving an abusive partner often means separating children from their father. The most compelling reasons women offered for continuing the relationship highlighted their children and their children's best interests. "Children" was also one of the most frequent responses to the

question, "Why Stay?" Though particularly true for African-American participants, women in all of the focus groups insisted that their partners were good fathers to their children and that the children loved their father. Many of the focus groups participants had been denied a two-parent family and were desperate to provide it for their children.

> *. . .It was for my child because I didn't grow up with* my *father, and I never... I* wanted *my son to* have *two parents.*
>
> *African-American rural* woman, *Georgia*

Several women anticipated resentment from their children if they were to break up the family. One woman from Pennsylvania remarked that mothers are *"Scared that your children will hate you."* Children also were used as a threat to ensure that the women would persist in the relationship. One woman's partner said, *"Leave me if you want to and I'll take the kids."* The following quote details a similar account.

> *. . .He* was *good to the kids. So I didn't want to break up their relationship, and you know, I, he used to tell me, I'm going, you know, when you leave, I'm going to* take you to court, *get the kids.*
>
> *Caucasian rural woman, Illinois*

Relational Variables

Many women stayed because they had a great deal **invested** in the relationship. The longer they stayed, the harder it became to leave:

> *Security,* I mean *you gotta think* about *it. Now, you* been *with a man 20 years. You done built your house there.* That's *where you live, all your stuff,* all *your things, your kids went to school there, that's they home, that's the only home they know. You, I mean, who gonna uproot everything they own and just move away from that?*
>
> *African-American* rural *woman, Illinois*

A sense of **inertia** was also described in the discussions. As tersely stated by one woman, "*You're there.*" Within this theme, reasons for staying included not wanting to start over again and being too exhausted to leave.

While inertia implies a passive acceptance, more often women reported staying for more resolute purposes. A sizable number of women stayed with their abusive partner because they were committed to their **wedding vows.** Several women attempted counseling to improve their

marriages. Often, religious convictions included the belief that divorce was a sin and that marriage was for life, no matter what. On the other hand, several women were confused because their partners took the same vows, yet were not honoring them with love and support.

> *I was confused because I thought that when you married someone and they took vows upon the Lord that they were supposed to care about you and love you and all that...*
>
> *African-American rural woman, Illinois*

> *I know I was taught in school that if I commit to a man I had to* stay *with that man till death did we part. Or one of us parted. And that* was *instilled* in *me... Plus they remind you, don't forget, it's supposed to be for better or for worse, but my God you're about* to *kill me. I want out of here.*
>
> *African-American urban woman, Illinois*

Because the focus group participants experienced periods when everything seemed normal in their relationships, it is little wonder that they were **confused** about both their feelings toward their partners and their partners' feelings toward them. Remorseful apologies, romantic gestures, and promises of cessation seemed heartfelt and compelling at the time of reconciliation, but were later viewed as manipulative, igniting hope that the violence would end and they would return to the way they were early in the relationship.

> *Respondent:* *So it's like one minute they might be hitting you* and *in the next second,* you *know,* they *could be loving you. So it's like they give like conflicting type of, what's the word?*
>
> *Respondent:* *mixed* signals?
>
> *Respondent:* *. . .* Yeah *emotions, yeah. Like mixed signals. They give like mixed signals because* it *could be physical* at one *point and then like* two *seconds later it's like, 'oh I love you, I love you'. And* then *it won't happen again.* But *then,* it *does.*
>
> *African-American urban woman, Georgia*

The **honeymoon period** is universally understood by victims of intimate partner abuse; countless women in the focus groups used these words to describe the hills and valleys of their relationships. They describe the extreme remorse of their partners, who became different men during the forgive-and-forget stage. Strikingly, many women knew from experience how long the honeymoon would last.

> *-Flowers, candy, money, gifts, you think it's OK. In another two weeks you get your* head *knocked again.*
>
> *African-American rural woman, Pennsylvania*

They come with flowers and this and that and they're sorry. 'I *really* love you. That was a *mistake. I was upset* because of *such and such and such.'*

African-American urban woman, Georgia

The belief that **he would change** was dominant throughout the discussions:

So many times we deal with our hearts instead of our heads 'cause we *can go with this over and over again and* each *time he says I'm sorry I won't do it again, but you know, you wanna believe that* each *time and before you know it you're in it for 10, 15 years, you know, and they're still telling you* the *same thing.*

African-American urban woman, *Georgia*

Participants also reported other compelling reasons for staying beyond believing his apologies and promises. These included spiritual belief that God would heal the abuser, or that he would learn to show his affection in other ways. African-American women spoke more often of **believing him** when he said he would change. Caucasian women frequently expressed a belief that **they could change their abusers,** by figuring out what went wrong, rather than a belief that he would change of his own accord.

. ..And you just keep holding on to that, *God it's going to go back to the way* it *was. If I could just change* what *they're doing. If I could just figure out what went wrong this relationship will go back to where it was in the beginning...*

Caucasian urban woman, Georgia

A variant of this theme was to view themselves as the problem, rather than their abusers:

. ..And then you *try to make yourself the problem and you try to fix that problem. But I have to* say *I knew that he was abused and knew that he* was *abusive and thought I could change him. And that's the number one symptom* right there. *That we think for some* reason that *it will make us more whole if we* can *help this person because we care so much about other people...*

Caucasian *urban woman,* Georgia

An African-American woman made a similar point:

Respondent: *The other reason why I think* women *stay is because, you buy yourself* a *HUD home, and you wanna fix it up.*

Moderator: *So you buy a HUD home...*

Respondent: *The* man *represents, you know what I'm saying?* Women *that wanna, they think we can change 'em, we think we gonna fix 'em up.*

African-American rural woman, Georgia

Some of the most painful stories in the focus groups were those describing how women attempted to control the external environment in the hopes of preventing the violent episodes. The phrase **"walking on eggshells"** represented both an early warning sign and an influence to stay because she continued to believe that she could influence the course of events.

> ***Cuz you be scared to be yourself. You get lost. You don't even know who yourself is, you're so caught up in the hope, hoping you don't say or do the wrong thing***
>
> ***African-American urban woman, Pennsylvania***

> ***I felt really strong when I was in it because I felt like there was, I could maybe change him if I could just cook good enough and get enough sexy underwear. You know? And I felt like that nobody really understood [name], but I did, and if they just understood him, they would know what a great guy he was down inside, that he was just hurting and sick. So I felt really determined there.***
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman, Georgia***

> ***. ..so you're walking around on eggshells because you know it's coming, but you don't know when.***
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman, Oregon***

Psychologic And Logistical Barriers

Fear of the Repercussions of Leaving

The most frequent responses to the question about staying in the relationship was simply **fear.** Abusive partners often made it clear that severe consequences would result from leaving. Balancing the terror in the relationship and the fear of the unknown outside of the relationship, many women opted to stay in the situation that seemed more predictable and known. Women's own words best convey that they were often caught between a rock and a hard place.

> ***I stayed with him because I knew he was going to kill me. I didn't think it, I knew it.***
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman, Georgia***

You're scared. *to stay with 'em, and scared to leave.*

African-American urban woman, Pennsylvania

I was afraid to leave because I figured he **was gonna** *hunt* **me** *down and* **beat** *me up* **and** *drag me back so he got me so bad that I wouldn't even go out my door.*

Caucasian urban woman, Oregon

Women also expressed fear on behalf of their children. The fear was not only that he would hurt the children if she attempted to leave, but also that he would manipulate the situation to gain control of the children.

. ..that he'll come after the children...and try to **take** *them away*

African-American urban woman, Georgia

Also what they, what the abuser does with the child, children to control **whoever** *they're abusing. Umm, there's a lot of psychological abuse there too as far as what they'll do to the children.*

Caucasian urban **woman,** *Oregon*

The theme of being brainwashed like hostages by their captors, was prevalent in several focus groups.

And the only thing was, is I was in a helpless position. I **was** *a prisoner...in every way* **literally** *except there wasn't bars around me...and people were afraid to help me for fear of him killing them or...*

Caucasian *rural woman, Oregon*

As illustrated in the above quote, women were also afraid that their abusers would hurt family members and friends if they tried to help them leave. One woman's partner threatened her father, another hinted that he would destroy her mother's house, and other women were sure from his constant threats that anyone who tried to intervene would be a target. Only one woman said that she was afraid to leave because her abuser threatened to kill himself, though another participant stated that her relationship ended because her partner did commit suicide.

Trapped

Well that's *a proven fact, that you're more at risk after you leave.*

Caucasian **rural** *woman, Illinois*

Abused women often behave very rationally, despite the chaos in their lives, making logical choices to stay in the relationship. In some cases, the threat of death upon leaving is very real and known to her-to the extent that staying is, paradoxically, **protective behavior.** As can be seen from the illustrative quotes to follow, it is not the case that women continued their relationships because they had not considered the alternatives. Clearly, many women in the focus groups had done just that, carefully analyzing the consequences of leaving for themselves and for other loved ones and frequently weighing the pros and cons in their minds. Indeed, women stayed because the scales still tipped in favor of staying.

There are both psychological and logistical dimensions to being trapped in a relationship. Many women perceived that they were trapped, when in fact alternatives to their situation existed but were unexplored because they were not ready to leave. Conversely, women who were ready and who had broken through their psychological barriers faced financial and other obstacles that prevented them from taking action.

A dominant theme in the discussions about enduring abusive relationships **was not being ready** to leave. In contrast to women who felt hopeful that he would change, most women responding in this way were explaining their exhaustion and lack of self-efficacy in leaving.

> ***And you're just exhausted. It takes you all you can do to get through every day, let* alone *try and* plan *ahead enough to do something as drastic* as get *out.***
>
> ***Caucasian rural woman, Oregon***

However, a few women did state that because they loved their abusers, they were not ready to let him go.

> ***I never called the police on him 'cause I was afraid of what he would do when he got out, plus I knew that* it *would be over with if I ever called the police... I* wasn't *ready* to give *that up for a long time... I knew that once I called the police on him, he, we would be through.***
>
> ***Caucasian rural woman, Oregon***

Many women described the abuser's ability to convince his partner that he was the only one in the world who would love her. Combined with her feelings of worthlessness and her isolation, many focus group participants doubt the possibility of finding intimacy ever again. The feeling of having **no alternatives** appeared to be especially salient for women with children.

And don't think nobody is going to love you with all them *children.*

Caucasian urban woman, Illinois

Women in the focus groups were very pessimistic about finding a "good" man. This was a particularly strong theme for African-American women, who also discussed the threat of other women taking their man if they were to let him go.

If *you meet somebody, they might be an abuser, too...*

African-American rural woman, Illinois

You *think about all of those things* before you make *a decision on leaving. It's, you know, gee this is the one person who has been providing because he wouldn't let you work.* You've *got three kids or four kids or five kids to take* care *of,* you *know, how are you going to do if? If you, if you go out* and *get a job and all of your money is going to* a *babysitter,* and then you *will have, you will still have* no *money and then you have to depend on him. And where am I going to live? How am I going to move all of my* stuff? *My kids? I mean everything goes through your head.*

Caucasian rural woman, Illinois

As women's stories imply, there are layers of readiness to leaving. Some experienced almost insurmountable barriers. As a result, despite an emotional readiness to leave, logistical obstacles prevented them from taking action. One barrier such obstacle, particularly salient for African-**American** urban women, **was financial dependence,** which was often part of the abuser's control over his partner. Women stated that they were not allowed to work, that he made sure that she got pregnant quickly, and that he had sovereign authority over their finances. A few participants even expressed that his abuse was a small price to pay because he provided for the family.

And I was afraid to leave because I didn't have any money.

African-American urban woman, Georgia

He may be abusing you one way, but he'll still take care of the house.

African-American urban woman, Pennsylvania

See a lot *of women go through the abuse for the financial thing... Because* they *can't get out and get their own job. They don't have no high school education or either they* got *so many, they got so many little babies, they couldn't afford* to *pay the day care anyway.*

African-American urban woman, Pennsylvania

Equally formidablefor many women was having **no place** to go. Even if they wanted to leave,

> ***You can't just walk out the door with your kids, you don't, you don't have a place to go with them.***
>
> ***African-American rural woman, Illinois***

> ***I didn't have no where to go. I had no family. Um, and so it was really hard when I wanted to go I couldn't leave because where could I go? You know? Nobody to help me and I have kids.***
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman, Illinois***

women described a pervasive sense of having no place to go, as well as the reality of having limited access to shelters and other supportive institutions. This was especially true for African-American women.

The primary reason women felt alone in their struggle was their **isolation,** which was yet another facet of their partners' manipulation and control.

> ***. . . Like he runs all your girlfriends off. Runs the family off... You know, so you don't have a support system.***
>
> ***African-American rural woman, Georgia***

> ***And then the bottom line boils down to, you stay. Because you feel nobody else is going to help you.***
>
> ***Caucasian rural woman, Illinois***

One thing you asked, what the point was that would make us want to leave and what might trigger us to stay.
And mine might be different because I do have children, but we all had something that might keep us there, but there was a fine line.
My children kept me in the marriage to begin with, and they are the reason why I got out.
And there could be other reasons for other people. It could be their families. It could be how they're viewed.
Usually the reason why they stay and the reason that makes them finally break and leave is very much the same, if not the same.

Caucasian urban woman, Georgia

Because I remember the abuse, I remember the abuse from before and what I said I'd never do, and I just took a look at what was going on. And what happened is, urn, he had beat me so bad that my face was, like my eye was down here. I mean I thought 1 was going to have plastic surgery. And I looked in the mirror.

He cried. I put him out. And that was it. Cuz I knew that I didn't have to look like that. I didn't need nobody to treat me like that. And the next time, either he was going to kill me or I was going to kill him. I had enough and I knew I didn't have to live like that anymore.

African-American urban woman, Pennsylvania

The reasons women offered for staying often resurfaced as reasons for leaving the relationship. What changes? What makes battered women reach this decision? The idea that there is a satiation level-that abuse is a cumulative process that ends like a swollen dam overcome by pressure-was echoed in the focus groups.

Women left abusive relationships because their perception of the relationship and environment changed, making the option of leaving more desirable and realistic. Things that were important when the violence began diminished in value, and alternatives were given more weight. This shift in perception was influenced by a number of factors. Often, women favorably re-evaluated themselves, increasing esteem to a level that facilitated their leaving. Children, friends, and family also served as sounding boards for information regarding the abuse and its effects. The increasing severity of violence, or its imminent lethality, also resulted in a re-assessment of the situation. The most frequent response to the question *"Why did you leave?"* however, was that the woman hit a breaking point.

Why Women Leave Violent Relations/tips

- Self-motivated shift in perception
- Children, family, friends & others
- Lethality of the relationship
- The "Straw that Broke the Camels Back"

Self-Motivated Shift in Perception

I love him andsomewhere along there I started realizing... I love him, but what about me?

Caucasian rural* woman, *Illinois

Many participants reported ignoring or forgetting about themselves and their own needs at some point during their relationship. Through outside information and internal reflection, women came to the conclusion that they did not deserve to be hit, that the abuse was not their fault, and that they deserved better. Very frequently, the realization was described in instantaneous terms, such as ***"a*** *light bulb came on,"* or *"I woke up,"* or *"It just hit me."*

You just wake up. Just* take a *good look,* you *need* to take *a good look at* yourself. *And* ask *yourself, do you want this when you're going into your 50s, when you know, get older...?

African-American urban woman, Illinois

Loving oneself was a major theme throughout the discussion. For these women, a necessary step in the process of leaving appeared to be putting their own needs first.

> *To me it's like loving yourself* too *cause a lot of times we put men before we put ourselves. The minute you start liking yourself, you're* not *gonna allow him to disrespect you.*
>
> African-American *urban woman,* Georgia

> *And when I got into the* marriage, *things* that *he did, it brought my self-esteem down about myself. But once I built my self-esteem back up I knew within myself what I* wanted *as an individual. And that love did not have to hurt. You know,* and *I made up my mind then* that *it was time for* a *change.*
>
> *African-American urban woman, Georgia*

Another precursor to leaving was seeking information about the problem from outside the relationship. This factor was predominantly mentioned by Caucasian participants. The information they sought was often comparative, such as observing that other relationships were not violent.

> *. . . when I finally decided that I wanted to go out and live my own life and I started talking to other people and realizing...that their husbands weren't like that.*
>
> *Caucasian rural* woman, Oregon

> *. ..I started educating myself with research and education* at *the library... And that also* was, you *know, good* therapy. *That was part of therapy I did for myself.*
>
> *Caucasian rural* woman, *Illinois*

> *The* more *I got* out *in the public and got to talking to people and finding things out like, he couldn't get the kids, you* know, *everything comes to place, not just one thing.*
>
> Caucasian *rural woman, Oregon*

A more frequent type of reflection was self-motivated and internal.

> *You just really beat yourself trying to figure out* what's *going on, but then later you see that it's really not you. You know* you're not *doing anything.*
>
> *African-American* urban woman, *Georgia*

> *I just started thinkin' about myself. You know, what are we here for,* to *be* a *punching bag?*
>
> *African-American urban woman, Pennsylvania*

The outcomes of this reflection are often **liberating** and increase the woman's feeling of confidence about performing a specific behavior, such as leaving. Associated with this increase in confidence is the concomitant **reduction of fear** of the abuser.

> ***I've learned how to dream about possibilities and the things, anything is possible and I was able to put myself into that*** **moment** ***and just be there and, and believe I could*** **just,** ***I could do this.***
>
> ***African-American urban woman, Pennsylvania***

> ***And when it didn't scare*** **me,** ***then I knew I could walk out of that relationship without him bothering me.***
>
> ***Caucasian rural woman, Illinois***

Many women realized that their **own psychosomatic illnesses** had been brought on by the abuse.

> ***. ..every time I would drive home, I would get sicker the*** **closer** ***to home I got...***
>
> ***African-American urban woman, Georgia***

> ***Stress manifests itself until your body shuts down. It's*** **a** ***silent degenerative disease... It's consuming. It's all consuming. That's the only way to really describe it.***
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman, Georgia***

> ***Sometimes it can be your wits end and my situation, I had a nervous breakdown. And it got to the point that no matter*** **what** ***he did to me he couldn't do*** **any** ***worse to me but kill me.***
>
> ***Caucasian rural woman, Illinois***

Children, Family, Friends, and Others

Children are often wise beyond their years. Several women spoke of their children bringing them to the awareness of the problem, in their own innocent ways:

> ***My daughter said to me, Mom... when I was five I didn't know myself. And I started thinking, and I looked at her, and I said, 'You know, I appreciate your honesty. When you were five I didn't know myself.' Because that person*** **can** ***have you so wrapped up, but it takes all your well being everything, away from you.***
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman, Georgia***

Respondent: *My son changed me.*
Moderator: *Your son, in what way?*
Respondent: *He would, I would hear him* say to *his daddy, you shouldn't say that to mommy.*

African-American rural woman, Georgia

I had a little girl to look at *me and ask me, 'Mommy, why do you let him do that? I love* you, *why?'* You *know, you* don't *care after that.*

Caucasian rural woman, Illinois

Other times, mothers developed a greater awareness of a changed responsibility to their children. Although at one time it may have seemed in their best interests to keep the family intact, eventually it became clear that it is more damaging to keep the children in an abusive environment.

I mean you have these little kids that you're responsible for, you want them *to have whole and complete lives so you have to say "no more," you know, and I'm responsible for these children.*

African-American urban woman, Georgia

I'm trying to show something to my daughter, no matter how much it hurt to leave, I'm showing her that *this is* not *OK, and if I don't show her now, then I'm gonna show her* that *abusive situations* are *OK, and I wasn't raised that way, and my child has a right* to *be* brought *up in a non-violent* home.

Caucasian *rural* woman, *Oregon*

. ..a lot of the reason I got out was because of my son. *I knew he'd do the same thing and you know my daughter-in-law would* come *back in fifteen years and tell* me, and *I would have nothing to* say *to her.*

Caucasian urban woman, Oregon

I did it for my children. Because I did not want my daughter to grow up to think that this *is what marriage is supposed to be like... Not only* for *my daughter, but for my son as well, to teach him and to let him* know that this *is* not *the way a woman should be treated.*

African-American urban woman, Georgia

The growing maturity and awareness of children often prompted the departure.

We were married for ten *years and then my kids was old enough to start really recognizing what was going on, and I think that's what scared me more than anything. Was* my *kids being, because they say if your children,* no matter *whether it's the female or the male, if* they're *in an abusive home and they see it by their parents, nine* out *of ten of them will be in an abusive relationship.*

Caucasian rural woman, Illinois

For many families, the physical and emotional abuse did not stop with the woman's abuse but extended to the children as well. Caucasian rural participants spoke most often of this factor influencing their decision to leave.

> *So it, for a while I thought* it *was natural, and then I think what turned it for me was when he started hitting my daughter who* was *only* a *year* and *a half.*
>
> *Caucasian rural woman, Oregon*

> *. ..Started cuffing my daughter down. My fifteen year old daughter. How bad she was and how, you know, like he had done me,* but *when he knew he couldn't do any more damage to me, then he turned towards my daughter. And I knew then that it was time to get out.*
>
> *Caucasian rural woman, Illinois*

A number of women remarked that they left the relationship because of the behavioral problems exhibited by their children as a response to living in an atmosphere of violence. Children acted out towards the mother or in school because of the abusive role models. African-American women in particular spoke of their children's developing troubles impacting their decision to leave.

> *And when* your *child looks at you and it's like, why are you putting up with this? And your own child starts to disrespect you and rebel against you because they're* too *afraid to do anything to him or them...*
>
> *African-American rural woman, Georgia*

> *Because you know he was doing* what *he saw his* father *doing.*
>
> *African-American urban* woman, *Illinois*

> *She's only four* years *old so she was reacting in school and becoming violent with the children in school and fighting them, and they saw so much anger in this little four-year-old, and they said that if I don't get her under control, they were gonna kick her* out *of day care.*
>
> *African-American urban woman, Georgia*

Family members and friends also provided feedback and expressed concerns about the abusive relationships, or urged the women to take specific action. Though much of the advice that women received may have been unsolicited, most reported eventually being thankful that people around them were insistent in addressing the abuse.

> And *when my kids, my kids were so afraid, you know,* my *daughter* was *wetting the bed. And it was,* it *was crazy. So my family stepped in and they more or less made me...[leave].*
>
> *African-American urban woman, Pennsylvania*

> *For me I think it* was *a girlfriend told me that, you know, [name], if you don't get out of this, you know, you might not make it. You know, and I think that's what triggered me* and I *said, uh-oh.*
>
> *African-American urban woman, Illinois*

> *My friend [name]. I* have two *good friends, they stepped in and helped me. But they helped me the way that* my *kids got taken away* for *the* safety *of* them. *And then, that woke* me *up to leave that abusive relationship because they* got *tired* of *seeing* the *same thing...*
>
> *Caucasian urban woman, Illinois*

Less frequently, women mentioned seeking out help from counselors, hotlines, and wrap around service shelters to prepare them to leave. Such responses were predominantly offered by urban Caucasian participants.

> *I went to a psychiatrist. And the psychiatrist got me to the point* where *I felt comfortable, very comfortable, in just walking out then. Just making my decision* and *ending* the *relationship.*
>
> *Caucasian urban woman, Illinois*

> *. ..For me it was the support of what, I went through Women's Strength.*
>
> *Caucasian rural woman, Illinois*

> *I think knowing that you've got an alternative...like the Women's Crisis Line.*
>
> *Caucasian urban woman, Oregon*

Lethality of the Relationship

Women who were not ready to leave feared the repercussions of leaving far more than those of staying. However, many women who had reached their breaking point realized that staying was in effect, consciously submitting to a death sentence. Women who were ready gambled on safety rather than accepting that **he would eventually kill her.**

> *You realize that if you stay, he is going to kill you. If you* leave *he's going to kill you. So I feel that I'll take* that *chance. If he can find me, he can do what he* got *to do. But* I'm *not going to stay here where he can get to me* every *night when he wants* to abuse *me.*
>
> *African-American urban woman, Georgia*

You know when he finally told me that he was going to kill me, *I believed it. I believed it* more *than anything in the whole world. Everything that he did and said led* me *to believe that he was going to kill* me.

Caucasian *urban* woman, *Georgia*

You can either choose to die or you can choose to live...

Caucasian rural woman, Georgia

The only thing... the only thing I had left to give was *my life, and I wasn't gonna give my life.*

Caucasian rural woman, Oregon

If I stay I'm gonna get killed, so I might as *well take a chance on leaving.*

Caucasian *rural woman, Oregon*

While this response was predominantly given by Caucasian participants, the flip side of this dilemma, the fear that **she would kill him,** was more frequently mentioned by African-American women. These statements were often very matter of fact. There were several mentions of the film *The Burning Bed*, which participants described as liberating and verifying their feelings of rage. Rarely was it the case, however, that women flew off the handle and nearly killed their abusers. Far more often, there was a calm understanding that if they continued in the relationship, one of them would eventually kill the other. Women also reported dreaming about their abusers dying conveniently in a car accident, or looking at him while he lay asleep and thinking of ways to end his life. The women rationally thought about the consequences, too, such as not being able to care for their children from jail. This often brought them to the decision to leave, rather than react violently against their abuser.

Because eventually one of us would have been dead... I was going to get him through his food. And I had a plan, but then I knew too that behind every *plan that I had to suffer the consequences. So instead of going through more agony, pain and so forth, that's when I decided to just get* my *stuff and leave.*

African-American urban woman, *Georgia*

I think it's the point that you just, it's the tipping of the iceberg you're getting ready to kill him. And then you think of, you catch yourself and say, Oh my God! What am I doing?

African-American urban woman, Illinois

You start thinking of, of nine million ways to kill him, it was time to get out of **there.**

African-American urban woman, Pennsylvania

The "Straw That Broke the Camel's Back"

The responses to the question, "*Why did you leave?"* reveal powerful consistency of thought and decision-making across the many focus groups: "*You just can 't go on," "Can 't take it no more," "You've just had enough," "Had it up to here," "Everybody has a limrt,*" *"You get to the end of your rope,"* and *"It was sink or swim, and I'm leaving."*

Women reached a **satiation point** that changed how they saw everything. Sometimes, a specific act prompted the shift in perception. For women in verbally abusive relationships, it could have been that he finally hit her. For others, it could have been a particularly debasing act of violence.

The turning point was when he turned violent. I've never accepted violence.

Caucasian rural woman, Oregon

. ..**That** ***was it. I reached*** **the** ***limit, and I said, ahh, now you can break my ribs, but you can't pee on me.***

African-American urban woman, Pennsylvania

. ..If he has so little respect for me that he can hit me when I'm pregnant that, that just, that just brought it **all to a** ***head for me.***

Caucasian urban woman, Oregon

Another aspect of reaching a breaking point is being **tired of the abuse.** Women reported being tired of the fighting, tired of getting beaten up, tired of explaining it, tired of being emotionally drained, tired of getting their butts whipped," tired of the control, and tired of being punching bags. One woman explained that her partner was a walking time bomb, and she could not see the timer. Another woman explained, *"You get tired of being tired. "*

Universally, women in the focus groups stated that only the woman being abused could tell w-hen she was ready to leave. Advice and prodding from others was stored away, but could not be heeded until she had gone though her own decision making process.

Well my mother asked me, *did I love him, my husband. I told her yeah. She said, well, go home to* your *husband when you tired of it, won't nobody have* to *tell you, you'll know. And she said stop running home every time somein' happens. So when I got tired, I cut* out.

African-American rural woman, Illinois

. ..It's when you're ready you're ready. If it's six months into the marriage or if it's 60 years into the marriage.

Caucasian urban woman, Illinois

Women's readiness to leave was accelerated when they realized that they no longer loved and respect for their partners. Some participants reported that their partners were unfaithful and had children by other women. Others simply stated that the passion was gone from the relationship.

The words don't even sound the same no more, the touch don't feel the same no more. It's just *over.*

African-American rural woman, Illinois

One woman reported that her readiness to leave was, encouraged by that of her children:

I asked them, wanna leave Daddy and, you know, we going to find us a place and live, just *me, you know, me and you all. They clapped 'yes.' We gonna leave Daddy. They was ready, you* know. *I said, well, they ready, I'm* ready. *So that's, childrens is ready, we left.*

African-American urban woman, Illinois

Despite reaching-a psychological readiness to leave, many women then had to wait in order to surmount the logistical barriers that confronted them, such as needing money and a place to go. The ability to be patient during this process is illustrated by these quotes:

You wait until the most opportune moment. So it's a coupling of, you know, want and decision to, you know, you're going to go along with the ability to do so.

Caucasian urban woman, Illinois

The situation has to change somehow. You have to be able to get away.

Caucasian rural woman, *Illinois*

There were many times I wanted to leave and I would suffer two more weeks of abuse just waiting to get paid or something like that so I could leave with my check.

Caucasian urban woman, Illinois

I called and I said to the police, I said, 'He's following me.' . . .
And they said, 'Until he touches you, we can't do anything.'
I said, 'When he kills me dead, then my children can call.'
... So what are my rights? 'You can call us if he comes back.'
But by the time he's in my house, cause he broke in one time,
by the time he's in my house I got no telephone,
'cause that's the first thing he cuts is the telephone.
How am I supposed to call? And they say that this is how it is.
I've got no sympathy, nothing from our local law enforcement. Nothing.

Caucasian rural woman, Georgia

It took seventy stitches. But the police arrested me for assault and
battery because I had hit him so hard I thought I killed him.
Urn, I broke the cast iron skillet.
... I mean, I was in the emergency room with my baby who was six months old.
You know, I had a baby in there who has blood coming from the ear and a hand print.
And, ahh, the ahh, you know, the emergency room personnel was telling,
you know, that he had slapped this baby.
And I mean, his hand was so much bigger than mine that,
and ahh, the police said it didn't matter, but I had,
I was under arrest for assault and battery
because I broke the cast iron skillet.

Caucasian rural woman, Illinois

THE OBSTRUCTIVE ROLE OF OTHER RELATIONSHIPS AND INSTITUTIONS

As has been shown, women in abusive relationships described having a mountain of obstacles they had to overcome before reaching a point where they felt ready to leave. As told by our focus group participants, some encounters with others were extremely powerful in aid in recurring iteration. Other potential resources, however, worked against them to obstruct their departure. Whether intentional or not, the action or inaction of other people and social institutions affected that all-important decision: whether to stay or flee. This section addresses the enabling and helping nature of relationships and institutions.

Many of the statements made by focus group participants provided information about the people in their lives whose actions or inactions served as **barriers to their leaving.** In most **cases,** this was the inadvertent result of some person's action. However, **in a few cases,** it was intentional. In many instances, these were people with whom the women had close relationships. In other cases, however, the people were representatives of much larger social institutions, sometimes those whose very purposes are to protect, to defend, to serve. The ways in which the women perceived that these people and institutions to have failed them are discussed below.

Friends And Family Members

Close relationships with friends and family members-can inadvertently influence women *not* to leave their violent relationships. In the case of friends, no focus group participants described active attempts to keep them in the abusive relationship. More often this result was incidental, a side effect of friends being generally non-supportive of the woman and/or protective of the abuser. Whether by making excuses for the abuser's behavior or failing to believe the woman's entire story, some friends fell short in offering these women the support they needed to leave. One rural African-American woman from Georgia said of her situation, *"Matter of fact, one of my friends and her mama helped get my husband out of town. And we 've been friends since we was one year old."* African-American women in particular described feeling unable to trust their female friends for fear that they might try to win the men over for themselves. Despite the women's knowledge that these men were a dangerous presence in their lives, perceptions that there were no better alternatives contribute to their fear of losing the men to other women.

In other cases, friends' actual efforts to get the women out of the abusive relationships were counterproductive. Friends' comments were viewed as overly critical, when the women remained with their abusers. One African-American rural woman described her friend's advice: "You *shouldn't have been in that relationship anyway. I told you that boy, you know, he wasn't gonna do nothin' for you.' You know, and you don 't wanna hear that."* The most common way in which friends enabled women to stay in their abusive or dangerous relationships was by not getting involved or by pulling out when the involvement grew difficult or dangerous for them.

> ***I went to* my *friend's house . . . . He kept telling her, 'I know she's in there, and I'm going to beat your ass if you don? make her* come.' *She made* me leave, *too.***
>
> **Caucasian *urban* woman, *Illinois***

These varying influences of disbelief, excessive criticism, conditional support, and even personal fear all worked together to hinder women's ability or desire to abandon their violent relationships.

The woman's own family was the most commonly mentioned enabling close relationship. It was mentioned in all groups, but slightly more so in urban than rural. Similar to the descriptions shared about the influence of the women's friends, their family members generally inadvertently created obstacles. Women most frequently mentioned this occurring when their families criticized them for having been in the relationship in the first place.

> ***You know, they tell you, you shouldn't have did if. 'I told you, you shouldn't have did it,'* and all that. *Nobody* wants to *hear that. Usually when they hear that, that makes 'em stay and fake it* some more.**
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman, Oregon***

Another barrier came from parents who either refused to get involved or rescinded their help when involvement produced difficulties in their own lives. The threats made against the family can be very serious as the mother who said, "You *'ve got to go. He 's threatened to burn down my house."* The daughter then recalls how she felt she had no place to hide.

The **abuser's family** sometimes served as an enabling influence as well. While only Caucasian rural women mention this occurrence, the examples they offered included repeated description of his family suggesting stress and love as excuses for the abuser's behavior. In some instances, the abuser's family simply refused to believe that their son would do anything wrong. On the other hand, there were also descriptions of family members who knew what the abuser was doing and

granted their approval. As one Illinois woman shared, his family *'-taught him how to do it. They urn, gave him the pat on the back every time."* This variation of excusing, denying, or outright condoning of his behavior were all mentioned as ways the abuser's family influences women to continue in the relationship.

Another twist was revealed when women described positive childhood messages about the importance of being independent, which prevented them from turning to their parents when they needed help. A Caucasian rural woman from Illinois explains:

> ***At the time that I, I ran off and got married, I was only 15 years old. And I felt my mother always told me, 'You make your bed, you lay in it. Don't come to me.'***

In addition to inadvertent effects, women reported times when the enabling results of family members' actions were intended. Women in the focus groups describe family members telling them they would be better off in terms of child care or finances if they stayed in the relationship. According to participants, this generally was to avoid having to offer the woman money or to share in the responsibility of rearing the children. One woman related:

> ***One day after we broke up and she was totally angry with me, she wouldn't even take care of the children for me so I could go and do something, cause she said, 'If you had your husband . . . you wouldn't have to call me for child care.' And if I would ask her could she help me out with some, you know, give me 10 dollars until I get paid Friday, 'If you was still with your husband, you would have money.'***
>
> ***African-American urban woman, Georgia***

Although this response at first glance seems unfeeling, focus group participants themselves understood why it may have been necessary for the family members in question to cognitively reconcile the woman's experience with injustices occurring in their own lives. Far example, the mother described in the above quote *"Took a lot of abuse from my father, but not physical abuse, mental abuse."* Another woman's family story also reflected this underlying theme:

> ***I think there was so much denial in my family. See, if they, if they said there's domestic violence in my home, then what my dad did to my mother or my dad did to my sister constituted domestic violence in our home, so it was all kind of swept aside...***
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman, Oregon***

A related phenomenon was family members telling the women that the abuse was their fault.

> ***Not only don? they want to know, but when you tell them then they tell you, 'What are you doing?'***
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman, Georgia***

The mother described above, who told her daughter she would be better off staying in the relationship, reportedly said of the abuse, *"Youprobably deserved it."* Based on the experiences reported in the groups, it seems that being a parent abused by or abusive toward one's spouse affected a parents abilities to effectively advise or support their abused daughters. Violence was an accepted part of a relationship. The result was yet another hurdle that women had to overcome in their efforts to leave abusive relationships.

Social institutions

The **church** was one institution mentioned as creating barriers for women to stay in abusive relationships. Church representatives did not actually advise abused women to stay in their marriages. Instead, women recalled messages they received from church that influenced their decision to try and work things out. In the majority of cases, this was the message that vows are not to be broken. Women talked of having gotten married *"for better or worse"* and of believing that getting a divorce would mean relegating their souls to hell.

> ***We give up ourselves and either live for him, to try to change him, or live for the marriage. And I came from a very Baptist background that divorce was not an issue. I mean, that was something that we did not do.***
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman, Illinois***

This described how, a sense of responsibility for doing what is right can lead women to remain in their violent relationships even after the hope that things will get better has disappeared.

In addition to the church, many societal institutions were described as enabling women in their abusive relationships. The most commonly mentioned of these was **the law.** Both lawyers and the law itself were repeatedly described as having failed abused women. The most frequently noted ways in which this occurred were through:

- laws that are not tough enough to protect abused women from their victimizers,
- laws that seemingly turn against abused women, penalizing them when they acted to protect themselves.

Laws were considered weak for many reasons. Problems addressed ranged from the ineffectiveness of protection orders to the dangers inherent in a law that requires the abuser to actually be physically attacking the woman before police can intervene. As one Caucasian rural woman from Georgia said, *"I said, 'He's following me'... And they said, 'Until he touches you, we can't do anything.'"* One African-American urban woman from Pennsylvania articulated how weak laws, such as those allowing abusers to be released from police custody shortly after their arrest, complicated women's decisions about leaving their relationships:

> ***And people think, oh, they're just going to drop the charges. And that's why I'm going to drop the charges, because you're not going to put him any place*** **where** ***he can't get to me. I can't go any place. So the message to, urn, to the politicians is*** **that we** ***need some stronger laws to protect us.***
>
> ***African-American urban woman, Pennsylvania***

Women also described the seeming injustice of being penalized when they physically attempted to defend themselves. One woman tells such a story as it happened to her stepmother:

> ***Because the way I've seen*** **my** ***father*** **and** ***my stepmother fight, it's like, he put her*** **face** ***in the cat bowl. I would never let no man-but they called the police and everything but she stabbed him. They took-h was self defense-They put her out of the house. Took him to the hospital. . . .*** **Here** ***she, her face all bruised up, cat food all*** **over** ***her face. But they want to take her to jail. She was self defense, defending herself. So he wouldn't press charges. That was the only reason she didn't go to jail. And see, that was wrong to me. Dead wrong. But see, because he got hurt more.***
>
> ***African-American urban woman, Illinois***

Many women described similar stories of being legally faulted for actions they took in their own defense. Stories like these illustrated the generally negative sentiment these women shared regarding the judicial system. One Caucasian rural woman from Illinois captured this in her statement: "*What makes it hard, the law don 't understand anything."*

Although not technically an enabling role, the law was also repeatedly described as detrimental in its treatment of women who had already left their abusers. The result was not so much that women were encouraged to stay with their violent partners, but rather that they experienced great hardship as a result of their decision to leave. Some described working with district attorneys who seemed uninterested in their child support recovery cases, and others talked of being made to pay child support though they were struggling financially. While some spoke of being appalled when their violent husbands were legally allowed access to their children, others bemoaned how overloaded courts could result in women remaining legally married to their abusers-in the case of one Caucasian rural woman from Oregon, 3% years after divorce papers were filed. One Caucasian urban woman from Georgia described being served by her husband with legal papers forcing her to return to him, over 6 months after she had left him. Even when they successfully got into the courts to have their divorce cases heard, women described facing the apparent indifference to their abuse as expressed by representatives of the law. One woman's story captured this attitude:

> ***Um, yeah, the day of my divorce I was standing I had a female attorney. Urn, and her name was [Name]. And I was facing her, and she had a white, beautiful white sweater dress on. And he walked up, and he broke my nose in front of the judge. And, urn, my blood splattered my attorney. And my first thought, you know, I said, 'Oh, you broke my f_____g nose.' And so I was fined $50 for contempt of court for saying it. And he walked. He walked.***
>
> ***Caucasian rural woman, Illinois***

The experiences these women shared echoed their common difficulties with the legal system.

Women also described **the police** as obstructing women in their efforts to end abusive relationships. In fact, these agents of law enforcement were the second most frequently mentioned social institution enabling abusive relationships. Many of the comments mirrored those described as shortcomings of the legal system. Police, for example, were faulted for failing to act if they did not actually witness the abuse or see evidence of it in the form of bruises. They were also blamed for choosing to arrest the woman who caused the worst injury in a fight, despite the fact that the abuser initiated the physical violence and the woman was acting in her own defense. These actions are a category of **legal barriers** in that the police were not lawfully permitted to act in **ways** that would seem to meet the women's interests. Other complaints about police, however, stemmed from their either acting incorrectly, or simply refusing to act at all.

When police officers did intervene in abusive relationships, their actions could sometimes be obstructionist. In some cases, this resulted from the officers' own lack of knowledge about the system. One woman described being told that her abuser would be kept behind bars for five hours when in fact he was only detained for three. A difficult situation followed when he walked into their home two hours before she was prepared to leave. In a number of other cases, women explained how police inadvertently enabled women to stay in their relationships. Focus group participants suggested that because police knew that many women drop the charges filed against their abusers, they tried to determine which women would likely stand firm, and pursued only those cases. In attempting to ensure that they worked with women who would maintain charges, however, they sometimes talked uncertain women out of filing charges.

In addition to the obstacles that resulted from incorrect action, police were also spoken of as enabling through **inaction.** In some cases, women spoke of police failing to remove an abuser from the home if his name was on the lease or otherwise responsible for the bills. Several comments suggested that police officers had a nonchalant attitude toward abuse, either not taking it seriously or not wanting to get involved.

> ***They don't want to bother. They don't bother either. They do not want to get involved. It's domestic violence? Okay, we'll take him out around the block.***
>
> **Caucasian** ***urban woman, Illinois***

When police treated abusers lightly, women were left without support to await the next violent episode. As one urban African-American woman from Illinois stated, *"In other words, that 's for him to come back and do it again about maybe 30 minutes later."*

A number of women also reported cases where the abuser was a law enforcement officer. Several focus group participants described the isolation they experienced in being abused by a man who was himself a police officer. Even the limited sources of guarded support open to most abused women were, for them, cut off or unsecured:

> ***But see it's like she said, the shelter, I couldn't even go to the shelter. I couldn't go anywhere 'cause he was a police officer. And it's the buddy system. My own mama told me when he found out this last time, you know, that I had an order, I had an order, just to remove the***

> *paper* from *me.* When *he found out he said, 'I'll be* there *in five minutes.' And I* called *my lawyer, and I told him, and he said, 'I know that he is not going to hurt you.' And I said, 'You don't really understand.' I had just enough time to get up the back door when he came to the front door.*
>
> *Caucasian rural woman,* Georgia

Many women described sensing a similar "buddy system" among men in general that protected abusers despite their treatment of women. Cases such as these, where the abusers are police officers or otherwise represented society's "protective" institutions, were particularly difficult to resolve.

Two final social institutions that women described as enabling their abusive relationships were the **medical profession** and **the media.** Medical personnel were not frequently mentioned as being obstructive, but women did fault them for missing opportunities to share important messages and resources with them about abuse. They suggested that doctors could be more helpful to abused women if they routinely looked for signs of abuse and were willing to confront women in their care whom they suspected were being battered.

Caucasian women in particular, spoke out on the media's role in enabling abusive relationships-especially, how media stories, even those designed to help bring an end to intimate partner violence, rather encourages it to continue instead. One woman described how such an unanticipated result might occur:

> *Every time I pick up the newspaper, and I read* about *a battered woman who is murdered, I think, God damn it, they never print* the *stories of the women that get away. All it does is perpetuate the* woman's *belief that she cannot get* away. *They never print the stories when she* gets *a way.*
>
> *Caucasian urban woman, Georgia*

In addition to the issue of publicizing only negative stories, women also addressed media messages that seemed to encourage women's abuse. One woman noted that *"the bitch, the slut, and the wimp"* were the only three images of women broadcast in popular music today. In each case, the woman is described as deserving of abuse and as responsible for accepting it. Both messages in music and in negative news stories were described as having a similar effect: they psychologically hinder women from leaving their abusive relationships.

Many of the statements made by focus group participants provided information about the people in their lives whose behavior, sometimes inadvertently, sometimes intentionally, and sometimes just through inaction enabled their abusive relationships to continue. From people with whom they had close relationships to representatives of much larger social institutions, participants tried to outline ways that close relatives, friends, and larger social institutions might be more helpful for women in abusive relationships. The next section directly addresses how women's experiences with close relatives, friends, and social institutions helped them to leave their abusive relationships.

I don't know, because it took years before I decided that I've had enough.
I am entitled to more than this. And I don't even know,
I had a good friend that I was telling my problems to at the time.
And I think she kind of, she gave me strength, but never enough to dump the relationship. And I remember her saying to me, you know,
"when you're ready, you'll just know it.
You will be ready, and you won't want to take it anymore."
And that's what happened.

Caucasian urban woman, Illinois

I had enough money to catch a bus in my pocket,
but me and my babies were leaving.
i called my grandmother, she said, "Baby come on."
From that time that the bus got me to my grandmother's door,
my grandmother helped me get back up on my feet.
Got me an ARCO apartment, you know, when I left my, the whole,
I left my home, everything. I left my furniture. You can have it, thank you.
I just want out. I'm free. Clothes, cars. She sat up at night with me.
She listened while I cried.

African-American urban woman, Pennsylvania

THE ROLE OF HELPING RELATIONSHIPS AND INSTITUTIONS

Focus group participants revealed a great deal of information about the people or organizations that were helpful in bringing an end to their violent relationships. Many of the women's statements signaled gratitude to individuals who were instrumental either in their decision to leave or in their actual departure. These people were often individuals with whom the women had close relationships. In several cases, however, the people were representatives of larger social institutions. In general, women talked of having received help that was either informational, emotional, or tangible.

Some difference between African-American and Caucasian women also surfaced regarding the sources they named as having been supportive. While African-American women frequently mentioned their families and the church as being supportive, their discussions rarely made mention of helpful social institutions. In the following sections will reveal the ways in which individuals' roles were transformed from those of mere interactants with abused women to actual accessories in their escape out of abusive relationships.

Whether urban or rural, African-American or Caucasian, there also were women of every category who declared that **no one** was instrumental in helping them leave their abusive relationships. These women cited possible explanations, such as being isolated to the point where they had no one to talk to and feeling they were unable to trust those individuals with whom they could speak. On several occasions, women chose to keep the problem of abuse to themselves rather than risk upsetting family members. In most cases, though, women were able to overcome those barriers of fear and isolation and turn to someone else for help.

Friends and Family Members

Among individuals women named as helpful, **friends** in particular were described as instrumental in helping a woman leave her abusive relationship and in helping her recover once she had stepped out on her own. When talking of ways in which their friends were most helpful, women's responses indicated that friends were always available whenever and in whatever way they were needed. Often, this meant providing an uncritical ear to listen to women talk as they sorted through the complex abuse-related issues. In some cases, though, a little criticism-in the form of an immediate, honest, unveiled reaction-was just what women needed to gain perspective on what **was** really happening

And if a man has respect for you and has a deep unconditional love for you, he is a **better** *support system sometimes than a woman. Because even though a woman identifies with your pain, there is that* **part** *of you that mirrors her where she* **can't respect** *you because she has seen how you have allowed* **your** *own self to be violated and disrespected also.*

African-American rural* woman, *Georgia

Although the reason remains unclear, the outcome seems to be that African-American women mentioned friends less often than Caucasian women as having helped them leave their violent relationships. Other individuals, however, were often described as helpful. Among these were the women's **own family members.** Frequently, the most helpful family member was the woman's mother or grandmother. Their own experiences with abuse may have contributed to this maternal help, as suggested by one Caucasian rural woman from Illinois: "My mom *knew. My mom knew there was a problem because we grew up in a abusive house. My mom was abused."* Much like a woman's friends, these family members were described as being helpful when they were available to listen--especially without judgment. This type of emotional support was sometimes desperately needed:

They were already trying to help me. My mother sent me...and I called them when I got down on him.... You know, it **was** *just like the pain got so great, it, that they had to step in. I had to talk to* **somebody.** *I couldn't hold it in* **there** *longer. They, still, they didn't know how bad if was.*

African-American urban woman, Pennsylvania

In addition to emotional support, family members were often described as **offering help with needed information** such as the number to a help line. In these instances, family members' own experiences with abuse may have contributed to the knowledge they had and were able to share. **Informational support** could be quite helpful when it was presented after women in abusive relationships had begun to think about leaving. Sometimes, though, that kind of support was offered much earlier before women even entered the abusive relationships, and included examples of signs to look for and to avoid in men. The following exchange between two respondents offers one such example:

Respondent: *That's how my grandmother taught* **me.** *She said the worst thing a woman could do is* **let** *a man hit her the first time-and get* **away** *with it, she said. Because if he hit you that first time and get* **away** *with you, it's on. You can look for it. He's on his way, 'cause he know.*

Respondent *He know he can do it.*

African-American rural women, Illinois

While the women did discuss informational and emotional support as being beneficial, the most common type of support they mentioned having received from family members was in more concrete and tangible. It is also in this category that the women's children and fathers are mentioned as having played a role in helping them leave their abusive relationships. One woman spoke of having her son take her to the emergency room after she was injured. She also mentioned having a family member with whom she stayed take pictures of her after she was injured that could later be used as evidence of the abuse. Providing a place to stay, however, was the most common type of support from family members. This woman's story is one such example:

> ***And just out of the blue literally-there was no trigger. It was almost as though I woke up that day and felt I needed to escape. And I actually called my father, at his job, at his business, and said, 'Daddy, can you, you know, I want to move back home.' And he said, 'Well, you know, you sure that's the right thing?'And I said, 'yeah.' And he said, 'Well, when do you want to do it?' and I said, 'Half hour.' You know, I mean, it was really that escape. I had made an escape.***
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman, Georgia***

The emotional, informational, and tangible support strategies described above were mentioned less frequently as coming from women's **coworkers** or from **the abuser's family members.** However, these groups were mentioned on occasion. Rural groups did speak of the abuser's family offering some support. In general, support from the abuser's family came in the form of warnings from his own mother or from other women with whom he had been involved. These women knew his prior record of mistreating women and, in a few cases, warned the woman not to get involved with him at all. In several instances, women discussed receiving advice about the workings of the court system and even a connection to attorneys from their abuser's ex-wives or girlfriends.

Workplace assistance was very rarely mentioned. In one instance, a woman spoke of a coworker who was also a counselor telling her that she seemed to be experiencing domestic abuse. Another woman mentioned being told by coworkers that she needed to get help because her problems at home were affecting her work performance. Although not directly asked whether or not they were employed, women's descriptions of being isolated by their abusers makes it plausible that many were actually unemployed while in their abusive relationships. For these women, the workplace could not have been a source of help.

Another infrequently mentioned source of support **was neighbors.** Although these individuals could potentially have been highly involved, very few women spoke of them intervening. When mentioned, neighbors' support was categorized primarily in a tangible way: they called the police to stop abusers' violent episodes. One neighbor was described as physically intervening. Even here, though, the fact that the neighbor was also a police officer may have made the difference:

> ***An ex-Sheriff took me in* and *him and his wife* guarded *me all night* long *with guns while he* sat *across the street waiting for an opportunity to shoot me. And finally he passed* out, *and the next morning he had his wife load me up* and get me out.**
>
> **Caucasian rural woman, *Oregon***

In examining the role that friends and family members play in contributing to women's departures from abusive relationships, African-American women mentioned their families' support much more frequently than their Caucasian counterparts.

Social Institutions

African-American women most frequently spoke of having benefitted from their relationships within their churches. In many cases, the assistance stemmed more from their personal spiritual faith than from any specific help the church provided as an institution. Along these lines, emotional or psychological help was most commonly described. Women spoke of having received *'peace of mind"* through prayer and spiritual belief. They also spoke of being granted clearer vision of the true nature of the situation in which they were engulfed. Such clarity was expressed by one focus group participant:

> ***I had* a *very spiritual experience* with *my family, and it, it really helped me to see things clearly instead of what I wanted to see. You know, I'm building my relationship with God instead of building my relationship with* my *man.***
>
> ***African-American urban woman, Georgia***

On a few occasions, women shared how becoming involved with the church brought an end to the abuse. For one rural African-American woman from Illinois, this was only temporary, lasting five or six months before *"It got back into violence."* For another, the effect was more enduring, though the physical abuse seemed now to be restrained by the tension of uncomfortable silence:

> ***When all that stuff*** **was** ***happening, I wasn't in church, and*** **then** ***finally I started going to church and taking the children. And he would make fun of me 'cause I was going to church. And then finally one Sunday I got up, got the kids dressed, and he beat me dressed, went to church, and he and I met in church every single Sunday. And he*** **started** ***studying the word...but like I say, he give me the silent treatment. I guess he, he's in psychology or somein'.***
>
> ***African-American*** **rural woman,** ***Illinois***

Though these stories depict examples of emotional support, there were also some occasions where church representatives provided abused women with concrete and tangible assistance. In a number of cases, support groups were offered at churches for women in violent relationships. The minister was often the church representative instrumental in making such counseling recommendations or otherwise offering assistance. One woman described going to her priest to document any injuries she received. His help carried over from the confessional into the court room:

> ***And I had marks where he, pulling on my arms.*** **And** ***when you have cancer, you mark up real*** **easy** ***anyhow. And I was going, anything, I would just go see Father. Look what he did. You know? I went and show 'em, he'd write down. And I went to court with...He went in my behalf.*** **And that** ***helped me a lot.***
>
> ***African-American urban woman, Pennsylvania***

Though this type of concrete assistance was not commonly reported, it does offer a powerful example of how religious institutions could be of assistance to abused women.

Outside of assistance received from church, African-American women were virtually silent on helpful social institutions. For Caucasian women, the abused women's shelter was the most frequently named helpful social institution. This assistance was generally described as informational or tangible in nature, with many services for abused women and their children. One woman spoke of the shelter being instrumental in physically removing her husband from their home after an act of violence during which her daughter phoned them for help. In many other cases, women spoke of receiving housing assistance from shelters in the form of a temporary place to live. This type of housing was described as very secure—a characteristic that proved particularly important for abused women who expressed fears that their abusers might locate and kill them. One woman relayed her experience with shelter security in the following way:

We were told at the place we go to, we can mention the name, but the location is held confidential. And we are asked to sign a consent form the first time we come there, we will not disclose what has been said there and where they're located. And that we will not commit suicide or kill another person. So if they find out your boyfriend or spouse is picking you up that has abused you, they will tell you right out, 'We don't want you to come here.' It's highly confidential.

Caucasian urban woman, Illinois

Many other women, however, reported that they had misconceived notions about shelter conditions that made them wary about turning to one for support. The following interchange among one group of participants reveals all the services they later discovered shelters could offer:

Respondent You had your own room.
Respondent: Um hmm, it was nice. I had a T.V., couch, and that, kitchen where you cook...
Respondent: And they'll walk your child to school. You were safe.

Caucasian rural women, Georgia

Shelters were described as offering a great deal of informational support as well. One woman spoke of contacting a shelter's counseling hotline when she was in fear. She believed that the information they offered may have saved her life:

And they said, 'Oh, he has a lot of guns. If he threatened to kill you, you should leave at once. You really are in danger. And don't let him know where you are, and don't speak to him alone.' They were great. And I talked to them a lot.

Caucasian urban woman, Georgia

Many women described participating in shelter-sponsored courses that taught skills in avoiding abusive relationships. These courses addressed the importance of checking a potential partner's police record; legal charges that can be brought against another, from assault to battery; and warning signs to look for in future partners. The range of services offered by shelters seemed helpful both in women's decisions to leave an abusive relationship and later in helping them rebuild their lives. Although identical services may not be offered by all shelters, they seem to have been very helpful for the Caucasian women participating in these focus groups.

Some women-particularly Caucasian women-also found **the law** and **the police** helpful. Caucasian women also mentioned laws or attorneys as being helpful far more frequently than, African-American women did. African-American women did not mention the police as having helped.

Although rarely mentioned, laws were generally spoken of as helping women who had already gotten out of their abusive relationships. Some women spoke of having district attorneys help them in recovering child support payments. Others talked of the help of new stalking laws. One woman spoke of getting emotional support from her legal representatives as well:

> ***They had a person in the DA's office who...I could call her and say, 'I'm feeling nervous. He's wanting me to drop charges. What should I do?' And she would talk me out of it. She would get me back into reality saying, 'This is a bad thing. You don't want to drop charges. You know, he's not going to change.' And reinforce that message. So all along they were holding my hand.***
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman, Georgia***

In some cases, the laws were described as being helpful to women still in their abusive relationships. This was particularly the case in places where the state prosecuted cases with physical evidence of abuse, even if the woman did not want to press charges.

Caucasian women described the police as assisting them while still in their abusive relationships. Their most commonly acknowledged helpful activity was arresting the abuser. This action served to remove women from immediate danger, but it also allowed them some time to weigh the gravity of what **was** occurring. Although this differed from the picture some women painted of enabling officers, the police were described by many women as willing to make these arrests. Women spoke of police officers hating to see them drop charges against abusers or growing weary of coming to their homes. One woman told of officers expressing concern for her situation when she was not acting in her own best interest:

> ***The police, they do get involved. Domestic violence is something that they, they don't tolerate. They immediately wanted me to press charges, and I said, 'No, I can't. I am going to do this Catholic charity.' You know, I wanted to get help. You know, where can they take me? 'Oh, well we can take you to the Catholic charities shelter.' And I never left. He never left.***
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman, Illinois***

Police officers' tangible support can also go beyond arrests. One Caucasian rural woman from Illinois spoke of police physically intervening in a violent episode: *"If the police hadn 't have come in and pulled him off of me, I would probably be dead. Because they came in. They heard me screaming. "* And other women described an officer working to prevent any further harm from coming to her:

> ***My husband was stalking me after it happened. And the detective, because every time I would call, and he'd find where I was at, he'd be gone when the police would come. I have a stack this high of police reports made, but he has not, you know, been caught. So the one detective that came, and he was a policeman, he was very helpful. He said, 'You know, he's got too many of these. So this is what we're going to do. We're going to either follow him wherever you see him, go to his place where he works, or to the residence where he is at, and we're going to tell him, we're going to tell him on the phone or in person, if you don't stop this, you're being arrested again, and then it's going to be a felony charge. ' And sure, you can be scared, but the police are very supportive.***
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman, Illinois***

Although these examples were not typical, they do show how women benefited when help was forthcoming. Other activities—like argument mediation, checking up on women previously served, and offering advice-were also named as types of help provided by representatives of the police force.

A few other institutions were occasionally described as having helped women leave their abusive relationships. Here again, though, African-American women rarely-if at all-mentioned these services. Among these were **social services,** a category of assistance that was infrequently talked about overall. One woman did, however, mention being offered **counseling** through the aid of a victim witness program that paid the bill when she was unable to do so. The same program also connected her with a district attorney who could prosecute her case. Other Caucasian women spoke of social workers providing follow-up services for their cases. One social worker came onto the scene at a hospital where the abused woman lay recovering from her injuries. Another social worker contributed to one woman's well-being by advising, off the record, that she leave town when her abuser's trial drew to an end. Overall, though, this type of help was frequently mentioned by focus group participants.

Considering the difficulty of immediately leaving the relationship and the danger of remaining through repeated acts of violence, this statement may more closely represent the level of safety abused women might consider:

> ***Ahh, call the police. At least in this way you can take some legal actions. And you may be safe for a period of time. And that time will give me a chance to think about what I really truly want.***
>
> ***African-American urban woman, Georgia***

Not every woman agreed with the suggestion to enlist help from the law in general and from police in particular. One Caucasian rural woman from Illinois said of police, *"But a lot of times, like urn, you have to prove yourself right before they'll* even *look at the abuse."* Perhaps in anticipation of this sort of negative response, one rural African-American woman fi-om Illinois, when asked by the moderator whether she would advise the once-hit woman to call the police, emphatically replied, 'No." Though not representative of all African-American women, lack of faith in the legal system had influenced a number of women to give up on the police as a helping institution.

Many participants urged action after the first episode of violence:

> ***Well I would say get help. Don't let it happen again. Before it happens again, don't just sit around and say, oh well maybe this will never happen again. Get help right away. Join a support group with your husband, or get counseling right a way. And if they're not willing to go with you because it's both your problem, then think about getting out of the relationship. Because most likely if they're not willing to get the help, then it will happen again.***
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman, Illinois***

The final piece of advice repeatedly offered by focus group participants was that women should immediately leave their abuser the very first time they are hit, even if only to establish a limit and to give the appearance that they do not plan to return,

> ***I would just try to get her to calm down and, urn, I can say too, a flip-sided thing. One of the things I probably would say, I don't mean not really knowing what type of person he really is, but just ahh, maybe call and just leave a message saying, 'I'm, not coming home tonight. We need some time. Okay? That way he can calm down from his rage and want to try to turn around and follow me where I'm at. Okay? Um, then by that time, it has given her a chance to really think on what she want to do.***
>
> ***African-American urban woman, Georgia***

Another infrequently mentioned helping institution was the **medical arena.** Although mentioned on occasion by Caucasian women, no African-American woman spoke of medical personnel providing assistance in leaving an abusive relationship. The type of support women received from medical personnel was typically informational, such as the signs of abuse. In many cases, the statements about helpful medical personnel actually referred to brochures or "blue cards" placed in the doctors' examining rooms. On one occasion, though, a woman shared how her symptoms were correctly perceived and how she received a referral to a shelter for abused women:

> ***Yeah, I went to the mental ward at the hospital, and they introduced me, they said, 'Well, you shouldn't even be here. You should be at Women's Strength. Because you're suffering from the effects of abuse.***
>
> ***Caucasian rural woman, Illinois***

Several women spoke of having received support from various **media.** Most of the emotional or psychological support these women described came from one television program: the movie, *The Burning Bed*. This program, about the abuse and eventual retaliation of one woman against her abuser, was repeatedly mentioned as having brought women closer to recognizing what was going on in their relationships and deciding to leave their abusive partners. One woman also spoke of how her repeated, almost trance-like viewing of this movie struck fear in her abuser's heart:

> ***I saw the Burning Bed. And he wondered why I kept looking at it. It was something in that picture was trying to tell me something, and I didn't understand it. And he knows that I will not continue to look at a picture, look at a picture, because I hate going to the movies and everything. And every day he go to come in, I'm looking at the Burning Bed. The movie. So what that gave me is that he is defenseless when he's either asleep or drunk. So I had him. Either he'd be drunk from being out all night, or he was asleep, so I had him. And he made me turn that tape back in. . . . I knew that tape was trying to tell me something. I kept that man off of me. I kept that man off of me. Right to today, you cannot get that man to hit me.***
>
> ***African-American urban woman, Georgia***

The Burning *Bed,* however, was not the only source of media influence these women mentioned. In addition to books that helped bolster their self esteem, women spoke of the role television talk shows played in their lives. Seeing other individuals in similar circumstances helped counter their denial and define their own relationships as abusive ones. The following excerpt is one such example:

> *And I have to say Oprah* and some of these, *some* of *the* talk shows, *not the, when they done these little raunchy things. But some of the issues dealing with women* and *violent relationships. It just so happened that I* was *video taping it, and that helped me because* sometimes *I'm sitting there, and I'm going,* my *God. I hate to admit it, but some of that, I* was *like, this is* me *sitting up there. Now I wouldn't go on national television, but some of the talk shows really did help me wake up and realize that,* wait a *minute, what are you doing in this relationship? You are an attractive* woman, just *only because, I mean, and* there are other *men out there who are decent.*
>
> *African-American urban* woman, *Illinois*

Finally, one woman spoke of seeing a public service announcement (PSA) on television that she hoped would be of informational support not just to women in abusive relationships, but also to the neighbors who may hear violence occurring and choose not to get involved. The PSA showed a couple that could hear the fighting, but chose not to intervene. This rural African-American woman stated how critical it is that people in such circumstances call the police because, as she said, *"Most of the time when he's into it with you, he wants to snatch the phone off the wall first of all so you can 't call the police."*

A final source of support these women discussed was that of **counseling.** Counselors were, one of the most frequently mentioned sources of support for Caucasian women. An African-American woman described why counseling might not seem to be a viable option for African-Americans:

> *As I began to go into the healing process, I* for *the first time in my life allowed myself to go, ahh, into psychoanalysis. I see a psychologist whenever I can get there. And for me, I mean, being a black woman, I think in our culture* a *lot* of *times it's like we don't really* want to *subjugate ourselves to being exposed to, or, ahh, sort of like microscoped by, you know, the white population, because for the* most *part, they've studied us and then abused us. Ridiculed us, and then put us down. And when* you're a *survivor of violence, you've already been through* that *process with somebody who knows you. So you don't wanna go through it with a stranger who is also suffering their own mental illnesses of racism,* ignorance *and superiority.*
>
> *African-American rural woman,* Georgia

Across the groups, counseling was particularly helpful in getting women to acknowledge that their relationships were abusive and to psychologically prepare to leave. Such was the case for this African-American participant:

> I got *into a* support *group and, umm, I learned* more *about myself, and I felt good* about *myself, and I felt like I didn't, I* don? *need you in my life to make me look ugly. I don't need you* in *my life to make my hair disappear, so therefore you need to leave.*
>
> *African-American urban woman, Georgia*

In some instances, a vision of the relationship as abusive was only possible after the woman's own veil of substance abuse had been lifted. Counseling sessions were also of help in this specific arena.

Another area in which counseling was described as being helpful was in getting the abuser to recognize that what he was doing was wrong. One rural African-American woman from Illinois described how, after she and her partner went to counseling, they were able to discuss the reasons behind his behavior. In that conversation, he acknowledged the complex effect that a history of family violence could have on an individual: *"He said that was the only way he knew. Hisfather was like that, and he said that's the way it was supposedly with him."* Another woman described the firm stand her therapist took in a conversation with her abuser. In doing so, the therapist refused to let him wiggle out of accepting responsibility for his actions:

> *I went to the therapist, and when I explained this violent episode...she asked permission to call him to come in. And he did. He was so confident that he thought he could fool her, and he could explain why, that there was a logical,. yes he did beat me, but there was a reason behind it. And so when he got her, when she got him in the office, she said that he needed to see the, go to the men's resource center here in town...And he said, yes, he would do it. And she said, no, you don't understand. You need to call here from this office.*
>
> *Caucasian urban woman, Oregon*

Counseling also helped women understand and negotiate future healthier relationships. For example, one woman shared the things she and her then-friend, now husband, learned through the help of counseling groups:

> *They teach you how to be aware of if,, to see things in yourself. You know, a lot of people walk into that class that have no idea why they react the way they do. It shows you how the chain reaction is set up and how to stop that chain reaction, not just the way the abuser acts-'cause the abuser wouldn't get away with it if you hadn't already been trained to accept it-and how to retrain yourself not to accept it anymore and recognize it coming on.*
>
> *Caucasian rural woman, Oregon*

What I know now that I wished I would have known then,
is that, that person wasn't the only human being in this world
that was able to love me. You know what I'm saying?
That there was someone else out there that was willing to,
to come along and maybe show me a better way of life,
and show me that, you know, I am a woman, and
I am a woman that could be
trusted, loved, held, helped, cared for, and that it didn't stop;
the bus didn't stop at that man. He wasn't the only man in this world.
That's what I wished I would have known then that I know now.

African-American rural woman, Illinois

WHAT WOMEN WISH THEY HAD KNOWN

Focus group participants were asked to share a "wish list" of information they wished they had known which may have helped them leave the abusive relationship earlier, and the types of resources they wish had been available to them. Focus group participants provided consistent reasons to these questions. They wished they had known that:

- others who could love them
- the warning signs of abuse to look for
- the help available from shelters and support groups
- there was nothing they could do to stop the abuse.

In addition to wishing they had known that there were others in the world who could love them, a few women also spoke of simply wishing they had **known they** were **worthy of others' love.** For these women, just a few kind words from other people allowed them to see that they could expect and deserved better treatment. One focus group participant shared how a group of co-workers helped her come to that realization:

> ***He wanted me to start nursing school to get support. And, well, the first year when people stayed away from me, they, I was shy and scared, and they translated that into snobbish. . . . found out later I wasn't, they started befriending me, and it suddenly just hit me one morning at lunch, I mean at breakfast. They invited me to have breakfast with them, and they were talking to me real nice, and all of a sudden I thought, if they think I'm that nice, then I can't be as bad as he's saying I am, and that was, it was that moment was like one of those moments in your life...***
>
> ***Caucasian rural woman, Oregon***

In hindsight, a number of women wished they had been aware of early warning signs of abuse, both for themselves and to help loved ones avoid abusive situations.

The third most common information they wish they had **known** was **the types of services available from shelters and support groups.** This was particularly important for those African-American women who never mentioned receiving help in these areas. In this section, several spoke about their previous lack of knowledge of shelter supports. One woman expressed having both a need for information about this support and being open to take advantage of the support:

> ***I wish I had known that there are support systems available, and that it isn't a crime or a shame, and you're not a nobody because you've been a victim.***
>
> ***African-American rural woman, Georgia***

Another explained that information about these kinds of supports is now being more widely shared. During the time when she needed it, however, no one spoke of intimate partner abuse. The result of that silence, as this interchange between respondents shows, was that she remained unaware and ashamed:

> ***Respondent:*** ***But we also know now that it's a nationwide*** **situation,** ***battered women, and they have counselors, and they have,*** **ahh,** ***shelters, and they have people that you can go to and confide*** **in** ***and talk to them Umm, before it*** **was** ***sort of a, a hush-hush quiet thing.***
>
> ***Respondent:*** ***Right, right.***
>
> ***Respondent:*** ***You know, it was like you couldn't*** **tell** ***the, ahh, other people about your problems or your situation, but it's, umm, it's a known factor now that, ahh,*** **there is a** ***lot of battered*** **women** ***around the*** **nation.**
>
> ***African-American urban women, Illinois***

Increasing national attention to intimate partner abuse has now brought women to an awareness of prevalence. For many, this was important because it reinforced that they were not the only ones in this situation. A final response in this category came from a focus group participant who also tied the issue of self-efficacy to knowledge of available services. She wished she had known:

> ***You didn't have to live like that. There was help. There is help for you. You could get out of it. You didn't have to stay*** **in** ***that kind of abusive relationship.***
>
> **African-American** ***urban woman, Pennsylvania***

A final common wish was expressed very simply: they wish they had known that there was **nothing they could do to stop his abuse.** This information was strongly resisted by the few women in the focus groups who were still in abusive relationships. Nonetheless, the majority of participants acknowledged in hindsight that resigning themselves to the fact that they could not stop the abuse would have made their decision to leave much easier. This participant clearly depicted the reality of the situation that so many women in abusive relationships are unable to accept:

> ***That really*** **you can't** ***change anyone. They're either going to be like*** **that,** ***you know, they're going to have a character. And*** **what** ***their character is not going to change because you want it to change. They have to want it.***
>
> ***Caucasian rural*** **woman,** ***Illinois***

Focus group participants were also asked to share what types of resources they wished they had, had access to. What would have facilitated both their decisions to leave their abusers and their actual efforts to do so'? Many responses were provided in this category as well, but three were particularly salient:

- education on abuse
- help with finances including training to be self-sufficient
- someone to talk to who could have understood their plight without being judgmental

Education on abuse could come in various forms. Advice from an older, more knowledgeable person could have been helpful, as this exchange suggests:

> ***Respondent:*** ***I didn't know not to stay***
> ***Moderator:*** **So just *knowing would have***
> ***Respondent:*** ***If I had known that, if someone older* had *a told me, 'Once they hit you one time, they'll hit you again* a *second time.'***
> ***Respondent:*** ***And again.***
> ***Respondent:*** ***If they had* a *told me that, I probably would have been gone.***
>
> ***African-American rural women, Illinois***

Another form of education is printed materials made available, in doctors' offices or other settings where women could safely read them. One woman suggested that had such information been available to her, she would have been quick to use it:

> ***It's like, when you go to the doctor's or something. There could have been pamphlets about when was the last time you got beat? It's none of them, you know, and straight-forward. And I would* have *picked it up.***
>
> ***African-American urban* woman, *Illinois***

Focus groups participants also mentioned that doctor's offices would be a primary venue for providing information about services and institutions that could help them leave their abusive relationships.

Women spoke of the credible assistance that trained and sensitive medical professionals could offer, especially since they have the capacity to recognize and offer non-critical advice on what to expect.

The first place that I went, you know, having the abuse, because I was having anxiety and depression and headache, and all these other symptoms. And if the doctor had recognized that, he recognized that I was depressed and gave me antidepressant or anti-anxiety something, which actually helped because it helped me see more clearly what was going on. I wasn't quite as confused. But if he would have had literature there that he could have given me or could have *said something to me to find out* a *little bit more about it. You know, he found out I had marital problems, and I* was *going through, and I was crying all the time. But if he would have probed just a little bit more, you know, it might have. Because that would have been someone that I would have trusted. That, you know, would have been a good resource.*

Caucasian urban woman, Georgia

Focus group participants also expressed how helpful it would have been to them if they had, had resources available to train them in handling their own finances and in being self-sufficient. This was described by a number of women as being of particular importance because so many women have had little or no experience with finances and general life management. For women who married very young and moved from their parents' homes straight into a home their spouse controlled, handling of finances seemed a foreign skill:

Like a clearinghouse for women. I mean, just so their kids had a bed or they had some blankets or something to get them by, because when you're trying to leave, most of the time you walk out with the clothes on your back if you're lucky. And so, umm, there has to be some resources, and they don't have to be new things or government subsidized, but a clearing house, like you were saying for women to have at least a little something. A telephone, you know, any, anything. Or women sponsoring other women. Helping them out, with getting a phone for the first time 'cause they, everything's been in *the* man's *name. That's usually how it is. They have nothing of their own when they leave.*

Caucasian urban woman, Illinois

Women also described the benefit they would have gained from having actual services available to assist them in meeting financial obligations just after leaving their abusers. One woman described an emergency system she felt would have helped her and others:

Yeah, I think there should be some financial support system set up, a lot of people in transition when they're trying to make that move, and if there is a, a, a resource center of some sort that you can go to find out about living arrangements and, ahh, you know, maybe you need to get back and forth downtown, you don't have the money until payday, some *type of financial assistance, that type of thing to ease* the *transition.*

African-American urban woman, Illinois

Finally, one woman suggested that supportive women's groups could teach newly independent women how to survive on their own outside of their abuser's influence. The idea of having partnerships among women who had left abusive relationships and were trying to make it on their own was a popular one as well:

> ***Respondent:*** ***Well, if someone would have introduced me to someone who could teach me how to live on my own, like a buddy system kind of, that had been through that before. You know?***
>
> ***Respondent:*** ***Like Alcoholics Anonymous?***
>
> ***Respondent:*** ***Yeah.***
>
> **Caucasian rural women, *Illinois***

A final category of resources women declared would have been helpful while they were in the abusive relationship was someone with whom they could discuss their situation, who would be understanding, honest, and non-judgmental. Women speak of how individuals could offer such assistance:

> ***I wish someone had been there to say to me, well, you've got to think about your life*** **and your** ***children's life. And you've got to find somebody somewhere, without going back in*** **there.** ***Because if you go back in there, it's going to be a fight for*** **sure.** ***And if you hit*** **back,** ***it's going to be a real, real fight. And we do hit back, like she said. But I would like for us to find someone that can give us something that will keep it*** **from** ***being*** **a** ***life*** **threatening** ***thing right now. Because that's what it's going to be when you go back.***
>
> ***African-American urban woman, Illinois***

> ***A support group of women who are not going to be sitting there being judgmental of your situation. Thinking that it's a funny story to hear about so and so who got her tooth broken or knocked out, or her jawbone busted or something like that. Or her hair pulled out, or*** **thrown** ***down the*** **stairs,** ***or out of the window.***
>
> ***African-American urban*** **woman,** ***Illinois***

In these suggestions, the hopes of many abused women were revealed. Though they had already left their abusive relationships, they understood that the journey was a difficult and perilous one. They also recognized that, just as it did not necessarily have to be so perilous for them, it does not have to be as difficult for other women now being abused. While many participants expressed as a bottom line conclusion that women had to make the decision to leave on their own, they acknowledged that well-timed, nonjudgmental, and tangible support could help women reach that decision more quickly.

I would say, "Oh, he did if again? Thaf's really bad.
That means he will almost certainly do if a fhird time."
Guys who do that, and get a way wifh if once, if gets worse."
If's a choice. If's a choice people make to do that.
And when they get away with if, they say whoa.
And violence, as I'm sure you know, is an addictive cycle—
a build up, tension, and then the release. And if's like other addictive processes. . . . And
each fhing you let go by,
the next one is going to be worse.

Caucasian Urban woman, Georgia

ADVICE TO WOMEN IN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS AND TO SOCIETY

The focus group participants were asked what advice they would send to women now in abusive circumstances. What messages would they give to these women? How would they advise them to respond? Women addressed these questions with two audiences in mind. First, they spoke to other women who are currently in violent relationships. Secondly, they spoke to society at large, sharing their views on the role others can play in helping women in violent relationships.

Advice to Women

The **most** common advice from focus group participants were to tell women **to leave their relationship the very first time they are hit.** Abused women were certain that the man who hits once will hit again. This was illustrated in the words of two rural African-American women from Illinois, who remarked: *"First sign of violence, get out,"* and "You *have to get out while you can."*

Another concern was that the initial violent act would not only be repeated, but also would escalate. This woman's statement was typical:

> ***Oh God, oh God. I would say it doesn't matter what you said, it was an act he chose. And I would say that, I hate to tell you this, but once that line is crossed, it tends to get a lot worse. If you do nothing, if you fail to react, it will almost invariably escalate. You need to take strong action right now, and we need to make sure he can't hit you.***
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman, Georgia***

Another woman shared how she had advised other women who were beginning to experience physical abuse in their relationships in this way. Her information came not just from personal experience, but from printed literature she received in a counseling program after escaping her abusive relationship. It provided a visual image of abuse other women could relate to.

> ***Going . . . going through the transition program at Lake Community, they gave us a paper, and it was a staircase paper. And each step there was a scale of where abuse starts and how it continues up until it's very, very violent. . . . Umm, death is at the top . . . and hitting is actually like three or four steps up. And I've given that paper to two girls now to show them that the abuse has already started, and it's gonna continue.***
>
> ***Caucasian rural woman, Oregon***

Another woman spoke of the odds a woman wagers against if she does not leave her partner the first time she is hit:

> *I would tell them the same thing my father told me, which I'm ashamed to think now that he's dead* now. *But my father told me when I got* married, *'When a man hits you the first* time, *he's* coming *back the second time. When he comes back the second time, it's worse than the first time. Now it's up to you if you want to* stay *there and put up with that and wind up with your face all broken up and your bones all broken up, you* know? *And all that craziness while he's out, you know, with someone else. Who's not* all *beat up.'*
>
> *African-American urban woman, Illinois*

Other women favored less direct and abrupt advice, while some urged not giving advice at all. Although they may personally have felt that it would be best for the woman to leave, focus group participants maintained that abused women had to reach this conclusion themselves. This was the sentiment expressed in the following exchange between the moderator and a respondent:

> ***Respondent:*** *And they do it when they're* ready *to, and, umm, they may have to ass whipping for 20 years before they do it, but until they're ready to believe they* can *have something else, they're not gonna do anything . . .*
>
> ***Moderator:*** *So advice is useless.*
>
> ***Respondent:*** *Exactly.*
>
> *African-American urban woman, Pennsylvania*

Focus group participants wanted abused women to know that the abuse would continue; would grow more intense; could not be controlled; and that the abused woman both could and should have a better life. Learning these lessons was considered a prerequisite to accepting direct advice to leave.

Another suggestion was to offer practical and concrete information that abused women could avail themselves of when needed.

> *If the person indicated that they wanted to stay, I* would *say, 'Well I've heard that these* are *the kinds of things to look out for. You know? Put* some *emergency money aside, even if it's* a *penny a day. Keep an overnight bag with all your ID in it.' I would give her, I would say, you know, *'Pack an escape thing, whatever. If you need to come somewhere, umm, don't be in* communication *when he's around with the person that you would escape to.' I would, you know, give her that kind of information . . .*
>
> *African-American rural woman, Georgia*

Discomfort about giving advice also commonly led to a third category of responses. Many women said they would want simply to talk with and listen to the woman to understand how she feels. This opinion was embodied by the statement of a participant who felt that the gravity of the situation meant that the woman needed to make the decision on her own.

> *First, before I give* any *advice, because I try not to give advice, I would ask her what is it that she wants to do. Because the decision has to* come *from within her. You know, because I don't want, I wouldn't tell her, 'Pack your stuff and leave.' He find you and kill you, and* then *that would be on me because I told you* to, *you know, leave him.* Or *you go home and you stand up to him, and he beats you up. So I would first ask her what is it that she wants* to *do. You know, that way I can know what type of resources she would* need. Or *who I need to link her up with. Or if it's something that I* as *an individual, as her girlfriend, could actually do for her. You know, but at first I have to find out what it is that she want.*
>
> *African-American urban* woman, Georgia

Many others specific suggested offering distinctly directive advice. Among the specific suggestions were filing a police report, giving the man who hit her only one second chance, and leaving immediately-if only for a short while.

Among women who suggested filing a police report, there were different views about whether that meant abandoning the relationship. This woman, for example, clearly suggested that reporting the abuse to the police would be a preliminary step in completely removing the abuser from the woman's life:

> *I'm going to tell her to first call the police. Get a warrant on him so he has to stay away from you. Go home, pack up his bags...Okay, and put him out.*
>
> *African-American urban woman, Georgia*

Another suggests remaining in the relationship while routinely making a record of abusive encounters:

> *I personally suggest to keep* a *diary. That writing down the day, the* day, *the* time, what *happens, and everything else. Because you best believe when you make that report,* every *bit...*
>
> *Caucasian rural woman, Oregon*

Most women suggested making the separation appear more permanent to the abuser, requiring significant effort on his part to demonstrate change. This participant's response more closely resembled that sentiment:

> ***You let him know you'll never speak to him again or* grace, *let him grace your doorstep until he's already showed you he's in counseling over it and getting some kind of help.***
>
> ***Caucasian rural* woman, *Illinois***

Giving the impression that one was leaving was considered the necessary level of seriousness for the abuser to reflect on his actions and that the abused woman would not be a willing victim to other such attacks. As one Caucasian rural woman from Illinois pointed out, : "Even *if you* wanted *to stay, it would be a preventive measure for urn, him hitting* you." This idea of leaving to make a clear declaration that abuse will not be tolerated was endorsed in many participants' comments. One participant suggested how she might pose such a suggestion to a friend who had just been hit for the first time:

> ***just give it some* space. *That's all I'm asking; just give it some time.***
>
> ***African-American urban woman, Illinois***

Other suggestions were also offered. The advice varied widely in nature, with recommendations ranging from waiting for God to make the situation better to retaliating right away. Nevertheless, the majority of these suggestions did have one thing in common: they urged abused women to recognize that the abuse was not their fault and that, rather than attempting to change the abuser, the women should work to save themselves.

Messages to Society

One of the most common concerns women wanted to share with society was that younger girls and boys need to be firmly and clearly educated that any violence, and especially intimate partner abuse, is wrong. Women repeatedly mentioned the prevalence of young people in their communities-as young as middle school age-had already engaged in intimate partner violence. And they feared that experiences with such relationships early on would normalize the practice of violence in these youths' lives.

Moderator: *And what should they* learn *in high school?*

Respondent: *The word, the meaning of violence. Whatever that might mean to them, as opposed to caring nurturing and loving.*

Respondent: *Because the violence, you could end up having kids who mentally abuse you and then* your mate. . . . *because a kid, it starts with the kid,* and *then you get your man, and now he'll mentally abuse you.*

Respondent: *Exactly.*

African-American urban *women, Illinois*

Focus group participants discussed the need to present a realistic perspective on the nature of violence so that it would not appear to young girls and boys as an appropriate way to conduct a relationship. In addition, they noted the needs for offering youth alternative examples to behave in relationships. Women described the prevention benefits of teaching youth how to recognize an abusive relationship and how to handle themselves if they encountered partner violence:

Well I feel that seeing that now in the 90s they teach the kids about sex education and their sex education, that they should have some kind of session to, um, things to spot violence. You don't have to deal with violence in your relationships. I mean, don't just teach the children about safe sex, teach the children about safe relationships. That would be a good idea to get the message to them at a young age *so when they do get out and start dating or* whatever, *they would know, you know, how to handle* the *situation.*

African-American urban woman, Georgia

I don't think that we can go back and clear everything that's already been done, but we can go with the future and maybe help fix it that way with the younger generation.

Caucasian rural woman, *Oregon*

Focus group participants also believed that laws must do a better job of protecting women from abuse. They most often suggested that abusers should face tougher laws and be held accountable for their abuse, as they would be accountable for any crime. In particular, women discussed the danger they often faced due to lenient rules after they had left their spouses.

They need to make some laws to stick and stay. If I go and testify, I don't have to worry about this *man getting out too quick.*

African-American urban woman, Pennsylvania

One urban African-American woman from Illinois suggests,

> ***You all excuse me, but I would make it mandatory that our men-or else you go to jail-go for counseling too. Because they think that counseling can't do anything for them.***

Women also spoke both of the importance of having tougher laws against abuse and of the need to regularly enforce these laws that currently exist. This concern was voiced by one Caucasian rural focus group participant from Georgia, who remarked, *"They should work on the Senators and the Congressmen for tougher laws."* The goal of tougher laws is both to protect women and to deter men from future abuse. This point was clarified by one woman, who said:

> **We *have to send* a message out to *these men* that *if you, you know, wind up beating up your wife, and the police* comes *out and see that she is all broken up and whatever, they will put his butt in jail.***
>
> ***African-American urban woman, Illinois***

Participants believed it was important that the educational materials being disseminated on intimate partner violence be **carefully distributed.** They made many suggestions about media through which people would be likely to notice and pay attention to these messages, and described messages they thought to be particularly effective. Women suggested prevention messages in the following venues: television programming (including talk shows) public service announcements, and made for-TV movies, radio talk shows or commercials, speakers at large businesses, telephone yellow pages, grocery store pamphlets, and even women's restrooms. Many women mentioned having received help from pamphlets in their doctors' offices. Most believed that having a number to memorize and call in a time of emergency may be an abused woman's best line of defense.

A final message focus group participants stressed was the need for individual members of society to recognize the signs of intimate partner violence and intervene when they realize an abusive episode maybe occurring. This may seem contradictory to their earlier remarks that women still in abusive relationships are unlikely to heed advice to leave the relationship. Nevertheless, they argued that during physically violent episodes, observers should intervene by calling the police to save the woman's life.

> ***Before my relationship ended, I was assaulted in the parking lot with a knife, and there were probably thirty people standing in the parking lot. And I screamed. Not one person moved. That's all I could think of was what in the hell is wrong with you people? This man is, I was driving out of the parking lot trying to get away from him. He is hanging from my car stabbing at me through the window. And people are staring at him. You know? I mean, that's crazy. People need to get involved. They need to do something.***
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman, Georgia***

Whether waiting for someone else to act first or trying to determine the severity of the act based on others' responses, the end result for these women was the same: people stood by while the abusive attack continued unchecked. To effectively counter such a response is to model ways that acquaintances can respond when abuse occurs.

> ***They even have like on commercials where the people are in the bed downstairs, and they hear the people upstairs fighting. They hear her getting beat up. The man turns off the light and rolls over and falls asleep. She pulls up her cover, and she's going like this 'cause she's afraid for that woman. So I feel like they should have more abuse coverage over and when something like that happens, tell the world, tell other people to see what really is going on in these homes with these women that are really getting abusive relationships.***
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman, Oregon***

A few women also suggested the need for effective comprehensive, and tangible support from shelters, and other social service agencies. One participant described her dilemma during her attempt to leave:

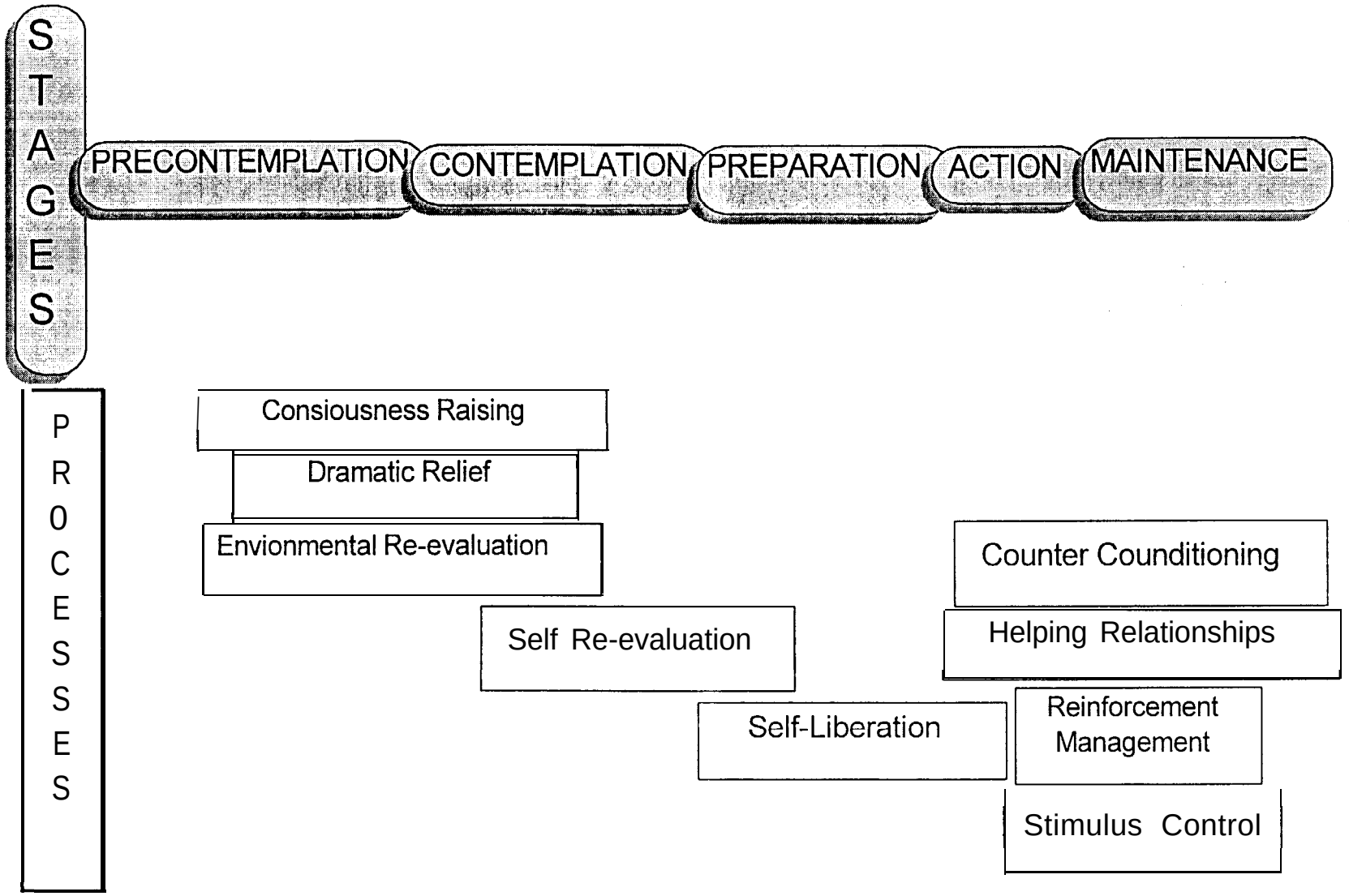
> ***And there needs to be shelter space for people with kids, and then there needs to be shelter space for people without kids, too. This time I didn't have my kid either, and, ahh, and there wasn't any room at the shelter. I was like, it's people with kids have priority, and I understand that, but, yeah, I stayed an extra three weeks in the situation before I could get out.***
>
> ***Caucasian rural woman, Oregon***

As one rural Caucasian participant from Oregon exclaimed, *"[it] doesn't have to be acceptable anymore."*

The Transtheoretical Model's descriptions of Stages of Change and the processes needed to move from one stage to the next have held true across a wide variety of behaviors, ranging from smoking cessation to condom use. The model has much potential value as it treats change as an incremental process. Targeted interventions can therefore be designed at all steps of the change process. The model also incorporates relapse as a natural (and repeated) step in the move toward successful behavior change (See Exhibit III). Indeed, relapse is treated as a learning experience, where individuals do not fail in their attempts to change so much as strengthen their future attempts. An emphasis on incremental, sequential steps has turned the focus from unrealistically grandiose behavior change to a series of less ambitious steps that slowly, but more surely, lead to lasting change.

Applying this model to violence between intimate partners raises a number of difficult issues. First, the model reflects *intentional* behavior change. These changes-quitting smoking or drinking, sticking to a diet, exercising more regularly-are enmeshed in a host of environmental complexities and temptations. Nevertheless, they are ultimately under an individual's control, however difficult that control may be to exercise. In contrast, intimate partner violence introduces another powerful element: the dynamic of a relationship between two people, in which one exerts physical and psychological force over the other. In this case, the "problem behavior" is the partner's violence. The stages of change that a woman moves through in response to this problem are reactions to someone else's actions-actions that she has difficulty influencing or controlling without further endangering herself. A related point is that abused women undertake individual behavior change, but they know that their actions will profoundly affect others-not only their partners, but also parents, in-laws, children, and networks of friends and relatives.

Another challenge in applying the Transtheoretical Model to intimate partner violence is how the ultimate behavior change goal is defined. Is it cessation of the violence in the relationship? Does it include both physical and psychological abuse? Is it a method of stopping the violence-such as threatening to leave or call the police, or following through on such a threat? Is it leaving the relationship? These definitions have important implications for how the stages and processes are applied to intimate partner violence.



Exibit III: The Transtheoretical Model of Behavior Change

Because of its origins, the Transtheoretical Model generally anticipates time frames that are consistent with overcoming psychological and physical signs of addiction. For example, while precontemplation and contemplation can last for years, they were originally formulated as six-month time periods, because this interval seemed to be as far into the future as most people were able to plan. Likewise, action was generally defined as lasting up to six months, with maintenance constituting at least six months of continuous successful behavior change.' For abused women, as with other populations contemplating complex changes in their lives, these time frames are generally too short. Many abused women stay in violent relationships for years, if not decades. Both the pace of change and the complexity of recovery or maintenance must be taken into account in adapting the model to intimate partner violence.

The concept of relapse, which is so usefully incorporated into the Transtheoretical Model, also has different parameters when abuse is considered. For the abused woman, relapse can mean returning to a violent relationship (or to a level of violence) with the same abuser. However, it can also mean entering another abusive relationship in the future. The abused woman faces a lifetime maintenance stage of balancing the somewhat contradictory themes of perpetual vigilance against abusive relationships with a sense of trust and possibility.

Despite these limitations, the Transtheoretical Model is a useful framework for considering when and how to intervene in an abused woman's change process, in order to help her end relationship violence.

The emphasis on the woman's own process of change is not intended to put the ones for resolving violent relationships solely on her shoulders. Instead, this emphasis is designed to explore realistic ways to help women end the violence in their lives and avoid such situations in the future. Such an approach addresses the needs of abused women, and would ideally be considered along side numerous other approaches that seek tp prevent ameliorate, and treat the behaviors that lead to violence between intimate partners.

[3]Prochaska, JO, Redding, CA, Harlow, LL, Rossi, JS, Velicer, WF. 1994. The Transtheoretical Model of Change and HIV Prevention: A Review. ***Health Education Quarterly,*** Vol. 2 l(4): 47 l-486.

The next section describes ways of adapting the model to match the processes described by women in the focus groups.

Focus Group Findings and Stages of Change

The focus group findings summarized in previous chapters provide important clues about how abused women define and experience the change process. In addition, as described above, focus group participants were asked to sort 18 adjectives into piles representing their state of mind at different points: early in the violence, during the violence, and once the violence had ended. Descriptions that accompanied the card exercise provided a wealth of information on how women perceived and interpreted the abuse as a process of change. Participants' insights and comments are analyzed below in terms of the five stages of change, followed by an analysis of the 10 processes.

Precontemplation

The focus group transcripts reflect some of the classic markers of precontemplation, as defined by Prochaska and DiClemente:

- unaware of the problem
- unwilling to acknowledge or discuss it
- discouraged about change
- defensive
- unconvinced that the pros of changing the behavior outweigh the cons
- believing that the behavior is under control
- not considering change in the near future
- unresponsive to intervention(s).

However, it is important to note some of the differences and nuances of how precontemplation is shaped by the context of an abusive relationship. First, in the original applications of the Transtheoretical Model, an individual's lack of awareness of the problem is sometimes characterized as a form of denial. Many abused women undoubtedly deny or minimize the existence of the problem. In fact, many used words like "numb" to describe themselves early in the violence, explaining that they willed themselves not to feel or react. In some cases, this phenomenon may be attributable to disassociating oneself from the violence, as a protective

measure. Some 'denial also is built into the cycle of violence, in which violent episodes are followed by honeymoon periods. As noted earlier, an abused woman's dreams of how the relationship could or should be can perpetuate her belief that the relationship is worth saving, and that its good points outweigh the bad. In almost every discussion of why they stayed in the relationship, women talked about wanting their children to grow up with two parents or about wanting their marriage to succeed in the wake of previous divorces,

An important characteristic of precontemplation is the belief that the pros or benefits of the behavior outweigh its negative consequences.

In denying or minimizing the violence in their relationships, however, abused women also have significant assistance from their abusive partners. The focus group transcripts are replete with examples of abusive partners discrediting the abused woman's version of events, questioning her sanity, and accusing her of imagining her assaults. In this example, an abused woman describes the lengths she went to in order to create evidence of her abuser's behavior, and his response to her efforts:

> ***I even tape recorded mine and played it back when he wasn't drinking or anything. He swore up and down I had somebody, some other man, at the house. It wasn't him on the tape. And I got my ass whipped over that.***
>
> ***Caucasian* rural woman, *Illinois***

Since they are unable to trust their own versions of events and constantly receive mixed signals of degradation and affection, it is no surprise that the most common adjective card abused women used to describe themselves during the violent relationship was "confused."

For some abused women, **their lack of awareness centers not on the violence itself, but on their sense of who is responsible for it.** Again, with active encouragement from their partners *("Why did you make me do this to* you*?"*), abused women believe that they trigger the violence through their own behavior. This, in turn, leads them to another marker of precontemplation: they believe that the violence is controllable. Unlike many other behavior change challenges, however, the behavior they believe can be controlled is not their own, but their abuser's.

Like other types of precontemplators, abused women are reluctant to acknowledge and discuss the problem with others (although this does not necessarily mean that they do not acknowledge the abuse to themselves). In explaining this phenomenon, some participants reported that they feared the *"I told you* so" reaction from friends and relatives who had warned them about their partner's shortcomings. At the other extreme, some women feared that no one would believe them, because their abusers had such a different image (charming, affable, etc.) outside the relationship. Similarly, protecting outside images of a *"perfect relationship"* was important to some women. Others reported the shame they felt in admitting that they had tolerated the abuse, compounded by their belief that they alone experienced it. Still others faced outright hostility from those they approached for help, particularly from their families or their abusers' families. The outside confirmation that they must have done something to provoke the abuse and that their partner was blameless confirmed the abuser's version of events and discouraged abused women from seeking help again.

An important characteristic of precontemplation is the belief that the pros or benefits of the behavior outweigh its negative consequences. In some cases, the evaluation of pros and cons may be quite subjective, such as the smoker's minimizing of long-term health risks and over-estimation of the inconvenience, hardship, or immediate consequences of quitting (such as weight gain). Indeed, a shift in the relative balance of pros and cons becomes critical in later stages, as individuals contemplate preparation and action. In the precontemplation stage, however, the weighing of the pros and cons leads to the conclusion that change in the near future is not necessary or desirable.

For the same reason, individuals in the precontemplation phase are least responsive to interventions. For abused women, the weighing of pros and cons occurs against a dramatic backdrop of dubious pros—financial independence, single status-and extremely adverse consequences--being alone, losing children and shelter, and facing threats of escalated violence. Again, her partner's influence in perpetuating these beliefs cannot be underestimated-"No one *will want you," "I'm going to take you to court, get the kids."* Some women described clear calculations of pros and cons:

> ***You don't want to start another relationship* and *get into it...here's a year or 2 years and damn it, here goes the bullshit again.***
>
> ***African-American urban woman, Pennsylvania***

> **I always felt *like* at *least* I knew *where he was, because he'd* stalk me *and if I knew where he was, I probably had* a *better chance of defending myself than if I didn't know where he was when he was stalking me...***
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman, Oregon***

If an abused woman takes her own safety and survival into account as the overriding "pro or con," her decision to stay seems much more rational. Moreover, the vast gulf between pros and cons also helps explain why abused women stay in some version of precontemplation for so long before contemplating or taking action.

Contemplation

In the Transtheoretical Model, the contemplation stage has the following characteristics:

- active consideration of prospects for change, including the possibility and consequences of change
- information seeking
- re-evaluation leading to greater concern about the behavior
- evaluation of losses and rewards of change
- evaluation of options, but not ready to act

For abused women, this stage seems to alternate with precontemplation. As the abused woman considers the prospects for change, she repeats the weighing of pros and cons done in the precontemplation phase. However, the balance between pros and cons begins, slowly but surely, to shift. Part of this may be due to new information that leads to re-evaluation. For example, many of the focus group participants noted that they were very young when they became involved with their abusers; in many cases, the abusive relationship was their first intimate relationship. As a result, they had no knowledge or experience to alert them to the fact that violence and control were not normal characteristics of intimate relationships. One Caucasian rural woman from Oregon shared, *"I started talking to other people and realizing that their husbands weren't like that.. ."*

Another aspect of contemplation is re-evaluation of the behavior, leading to greater levels of concern. As the abuse continues, women may find it more and more difficult to latch onto the honeymoon period as a justification for staying in the relationship-particularly if the violence escalates in frequency and/or severity. In addition, continued abuse takes its toll physically and

psychologically, not only on the abused woman but on her children as well. Attention to these types of consequences, mingled with less and less faith that the situation has any chance of improving, can move the abused woman toward contemplating her options.

When she does consider her options, however, she returns to the same barriers she faced in the precontemplation phase. In fact, she may feel even more powerless to act because her isolation, shame, and lack of resources are likely to have worsened over time. The **lack of options** and support is a common theme in the focus group discussions:

> *I wanted and needed to get out, but I couldn't figure out how to do it.*
>
> *Caucasian rural woman, Oregon*

> *It just looked hopeless to me...hopeless if I left, hopeless if I stayed.*
>
> *African-American rural* woman, *Georgia*

> You've got three *kids or four kids or five kids to take care of, you know, how are you going to do it? If you,* if you go *out* and *get* a *job and all* your money *is going to* a *babysitter, and then you will have, you will still have no money, and then you have to depend on* him. *And where am I going to live? How* am *I going to move all my stuff? My kids? I mean, everything goes through your head. And then the bottom line boils down to, you stay. Because you feel nobody else is* going to *help you.*
>
> *Caucasian rural woman, Illinois*

> *There are other alternatives. You just don't see* it when *you're in it.*
>
> *Caucasian urban woman, Georgia*

One unique aspect of contemplation is the extent to which women described fantasies of their abuser's sudden death. *"I was desperate. I used to pray he 'd get in a wreck and then I wouldn't have to worry about it." "I looked forward for the phone to ring and have him be dead somewhere."* For others, this became a less passive wish. *"When you start thinking of nine million ways to kill him, it's time to get out of there."*

Preparation and Action

The characteristics of the **preparation** stage include the following:

- readiness to change (in terms of both attitude and behavior)

- an intention to change in the near future
- use of knowledge gained from previous unsuccessful attempts.

> *For abused women, **readiness to change** seems to include the dual dimensions ofpsychological readiness and logistical readiness, which may not always occur in exact tandem. In many cases, the intense psychological readiness to leave is achieved before the logistical arrangements are in place.*

In the **action** stage, individuals take overt steps to change the behavior-such as quitting smoking, launching a regular exercise program, or initiating regular condom use. **As** with the other stages, however, it must be reiterated that the preparations and actions of abused women depend heavily on the counteractions (actual or threatened) of their abusers.

In contrast to the prolonged, ambivalent stages of precontemplation and contemplation, abused women reported relatively **sudden preparation and action.** As noted above, the language from the overall focus group discussion and card descriptions describes a "break." Often, this involved escalation to a new level of lethality-either threats from the abuser that he would kill his partner, her belief that her life was in danger, her desire to kill him, or her contemplation of suicide. This is also associated with the emergence of long-suppressed anger one Caucasian urban woman from Oregon shared, *"I was no longer afraid of him. I was so angry at what had happened over the years that I knew that bastard isn 't gonna kill me, I'm gonna kill him."*

As noted earlier, another common adjective was tired-tired of being a punching bag, living with a time bomb, walking on eggshells, worrying about what would happen next. Being tired of "being tired' was a motivator to leave for some.

A third critical factor in preparation and action is the safety and well-being of the children. As noted in the analysis of focus group discussions above, reasons for leaving the abusive relationship commonly included children witnessing the violence, being hit themselves, or developing behavioral problems. This is an extension of the re-evaluation that occurs in the precontemplation stage.

When describing themselves during the violent relationship, women commonly chose the adjective card with the words *not myself-as* in *"I became a person I didn 't like.* Part of the transition to preparation and action is regaining the sense of self they feel was lost or embattled during the violence. Related to this is the choice of the word *clear.* Women describe waking up, seeing through new eyes, a lifting of a fog that obscured the reality of their situation. In some cases, this was quite sudden:

> ***And one morning you wake up and he doesn't look that good anymore...and you go, now wait! He stinks! His hair looks awful! And* that *dribble looks* gross... You come *honest, honest. You just wake up.***
>
> ***African-American urban woman, Chicago***

For abused women, **readiness to change** seems to include the dual dimensions of psychological readiness and logistical readiness, which may not always occur in exact tandem. In many cases, the intense psychological readiness to leave is achieved before the logistical arrangements are in place. For example, women with children discussed waiting until they were sure their children were safe before making a break.

In terms of the final characteristic of preparation-learning from past attempts-previous studies of abused women confirm that they often make repeated attempts to leave the abuser or otherwise control his behavior. However, as Pagelow and others have noted, these attempts should not be considered failures: "They may return to the men that abused them, but they do not return the same women they were when they left."[4]

The same observation can be made about the actions that abused women take. While their attempts may not initially succeed in ending the violence in their relationships, these false starts may still help to move women upward on the spiral of behavior change and the self esteem that supports it.

[4] Podgily, M.D. 198 1. ***Woman-Battering: Victims and Their Experiences.*** Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, p. 2 19.

Maintenance

> *The maintenance stage requires determination and resolve...at a point in time when she is literally in recovery from her ordeal.*

Maintenance is the final stage of behavior change. Although relapse is incorporated into the model as a normal aspect of maintenance, it ultimately serves to move an individual closer and closer to lasting, sustained behavior change. In the addictive models of behavior change, maintenance is characterized by decreased temptation (to smoke, drink, etc.) and increased confidence in one's ability to change the behavior. In the applications of the model to addictive behaviors, the role of temptation makes stimulus control and counter-conditioning important processes in the maintenance stage. In contrast, precontemplation is characterized by exactly the opposite: high levels of temptation, and very low confidence in the ability to overcome it. Theoretically, successful behavior change occurs when temptation is negligible or non-existent and confidence stays at a high level.

For abused women, the maintenance stage requires determination and resolve, as it does for others seeking to change behaviors. However, these demands are made at a point in time when the abused woman's resources may have been depleted. After taking action, she is literally in recovery from her ordeal. Several women in the focus groups used the term "healing" to describe themselves after the violent relationship. Indeed, a number of researchers have characterized the aftermath of abuse as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. [5] The formidable psychological and logistical tasks before her can include bolstering her sense of self, dealing with the effects of depression, developing and maintaining financial independence (often for the first time), re-creating a home, and dealing with the reactions of children and others.

The damage done to an abused woman, often over a period of years, is not easily or rapidly repaired. One woman described how she still slept with a pillow over her head to protect herself from beatings-24 **years** after leaving her abuser. In addition to instinctive fear of their former

[5] Walker, LE. 1993. The Battered Woman Syndrome is a Psychological Consequence of Abuse. In: Gelles, RJ and Loseke, DR (Eds.). ***Current Controversies on Family Violence.*** Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications. (pp. 133-153).

abusers, many of the women were skeptical about future relationships. One Caucasian rural woman from Illinois stated, *"I can never trust a man again, ever."* These apprehensions and lack of faith in the future help explain why the adjectives that women used to describe themselves after the relationship were so qualified-"I'm *sort of lonely...a little happy, Iguess... worried, still, about the future and my kids."*

Despite this fragility, most of the women did describe themselves as hopeful, optimistic, calm, confident, and successful. Even as they struggled with financial difficulties, they savored the freedom from violence and were proud of their new-found independence. *"I don 't have much, but what I get, I can get on my own,"* shared one Caucasian urban woman from Illinois In addition, many had learned hard lessons. An African-American urban woman from Pennsylvania explained, *"I know that if somebody put their hands on you or tried to control you, that they're no good for you."*

Focus Group Findings and Processes of Change

Prochaska and DiClemente delineated 10 processes of change that capture both cognitive and behavioral actions relevant to different Stages of Change. In their applications of the Transtheoretical Model, some processes have been strongly associated with particular stages of change. The definitions of the processes are provided below:

- **Consciousness raising-increasing** information about self and problem
- **Self re-evaluation-assessing** how one feels and thinks about oneself with respect to a problem
- **Environmental re-evaluation-assessing** how one's problem affects the physical environment
- **Self liberation-choosing** and commitment to act or belief in ability to change
- **Social liberation-increasing** alternatives for non-problem behaviors available in society
- **Counter-conditioning-substituting** alternatives for problem behaviors
- **Stimulus** control-avoiding or countering stimuli that elicit problem behaviors
- **Reinforcement management-rewarding** oneself or being rewarded by others for making changes
- **Dramatic relief--experiencing** and expressing feelings about one's problems and solutions

- **Helping relationships**—being open and trusting about problems with someone who cares.

In considering how these processes reflect the experiences of abused women, several seem less relevant. Stimulus control and counter-conditioning, in particular, seem to address the specific temptations of addiction. The remaining processes are relevant to the experiences of abused women, but they may become critical at different points in the change process. Each process is briefly discussed below, in terms of the focus group and adjective card discussions.

Prochaska and DiClemente analyzed processes used to modify smoking, weight problems, and emotional distress. The analysis revealed that **consciousness raising,** along with self liberation and helping relationships, was one of the top three ranked processes across several behavior change efforts.[6] For abused women, new information that raises their consciousness about their situation is also critical-especially to the extent that it counters their abuser's version of events. As described above, many women go to great lengths to keep new information at bay. As one rural African-American woman from Georgia said, *"My child knew more than I did [about what was going on]."* Consciousness raising can occur through others or through messages in the media and self help books, among other sources. As earlier mentioned, a number of respondents mentioned seeing *The Burning Bed,* a television movie about abuse.

Self re-evaluation is critical to the abused woman's progress through the change cycle. In addition to *the* sense that she *was "not herself'* during the abuse, she develops low expectations of both her own capabilities and of the relationship. *"He spent a lot of time telling me how stupid I was, what a failure I was.. . and I believed it for a long time.. ."* said one urban African-American woman from Pennsylvania. As these give way to a sense of deserving better, she can begin to visualize and hope for a different type of relationship: *"I'm hopeful that there's someone out there who will treat me the way I deserve to be treated".* A corollary is that as she learns (or re-learns) to love and respect herself, she gains the courage and conviction to leave or to confront her abuser. **Self liberation** is a natural sequel to this process *"Until they believe they can have something else, they're not gonna do anything."*

[6] Prochaska JO, Di Clemente CC. 1992. Stages of Change in the Modification of Problem Behaviors. In: ***Progress in Behavior Modification, 28,*** pp. 183-218.

Many of the focus-group participants expressed interest in societal changes that could influence intimate partner violence, such as educating young men and women, making legal procedures more responsive to their needs, increasing resources for abused women, and creating greater sanctions and accountability for abusers. However, with so much of their energy devoted to surviving the aftermath of the abusive relationship, it is not surprising that **social liberation** processes were not as pronounced as others. The relatively recent experiences of most of the women may also account for this. Nevertheless, a nurnber of the participants mentioned continued involvement as volunteers for shelters, support groups, and other programs that help abused women.

Helping relationships seem to play a dual role in the change process for abused women: as sources of information and emotional support ("You *don 't deserve this." "It's not your fault.")* and as critical logistical support when women need concrete help such as a place to stay. Unfortunately, the women in the focus groups reported very mixed results when they were either offered help or sought it out. Some of the dynamics of abuse foster this, particularly the isolation *("He runs all your girlfriends off, runs the family off...")*. One important implication from the focus group discussions is the extent to which helping relationships can inadvertently backfire-for example, when relatives or friends make unrealistic demands that she leave her abuser before she is ready to do so.

During their violent relationships, abused women suppress their true feelings as a coping mechanism: *"I was so numbed out and checked out that I couldn 't handle the reality of my own life."* In addition, expressing anger or other antagonistic reactions can be dangerous for them *("I wasn't allowed to show any feelings"*). Because of this suppression, experiencing and expressing feelings about the situation-or **dramatic relief--can** be delayed further in the abused woman's change process than for other types of behavior change. *"I had depression, which was suppressed anger that was sitting in all the pockets* of *my body,"* said one African-American rural woman from Georgia. Another rural African-American woman from Georgia shared, *"I felt anger for the first time, but in areas that were totally inappropriate; I'd be upset because the house was dirty.'"* Other related quotes include: *"You have to work to have feelings, then before you know it, you have too many," "I was finally able to feel hatred," "I don 't really understand why I wasn't angry before, but I'm angry now,"* and *"At the very end what made it finally clear was when I first started to feel anger, that I had never felt anger until that point."*

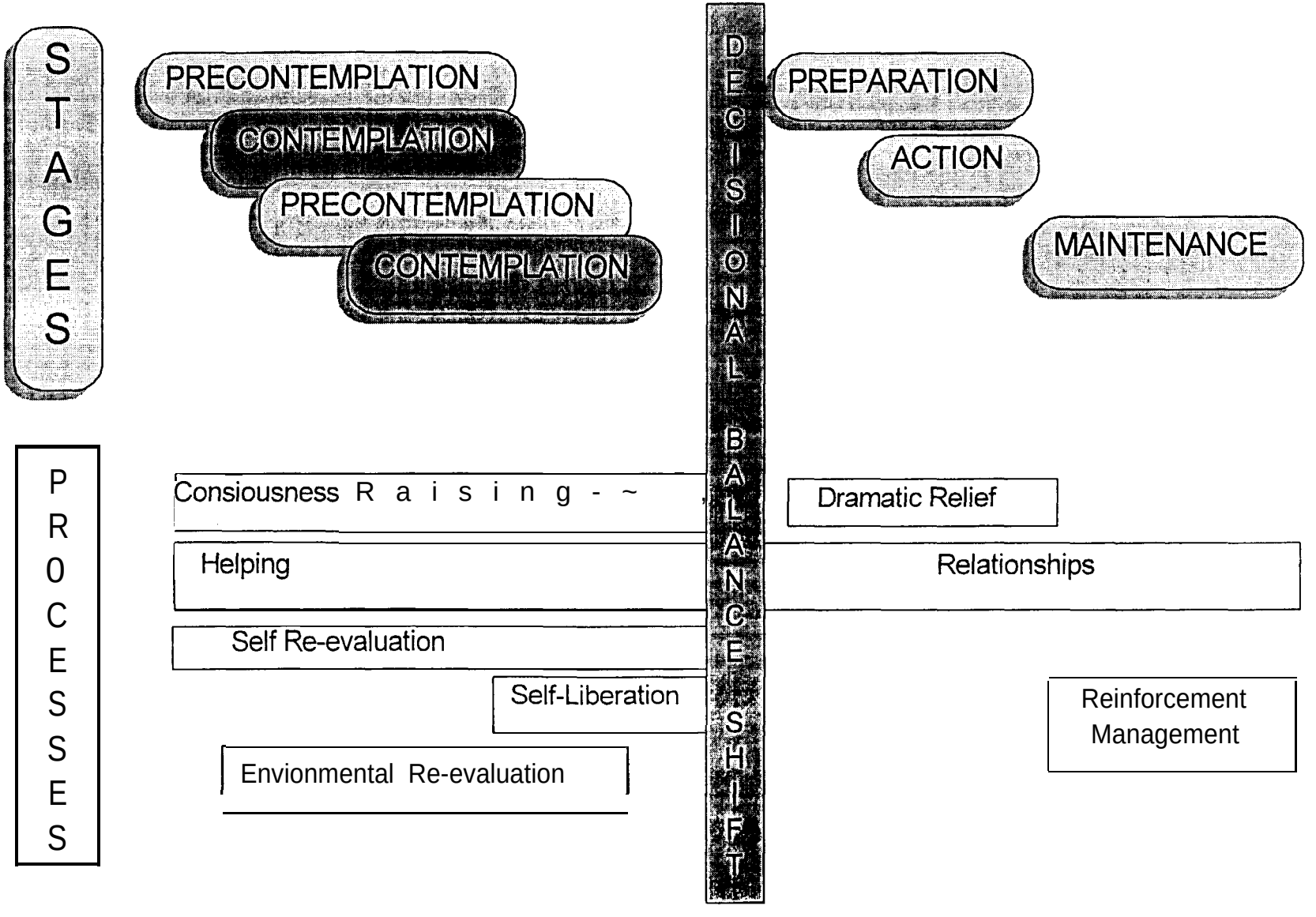
Reinforcement management—rewarding oneself or being rewarded for making changes-is difficult for abused women. As noted above, the immediate aftermath of leaving the relationship (or stopping the violence) can be a time of hardship and doubt. Nevertheless, women expressed satisfaction and pride in doing things for themselves-something to which many seemed unaccustomed. Exemplary are the statements:

> *"I started to care about myself...," "Through all the relationships I had, I don't know how to do them, so I decided to step back, get to know a little bit about me and what I wanted, before I venture out," "I have a clear conscience of what I want to do and where I'm going," "I know I'm strong" and "I'm hopeful that there's somebody out there who will treat me like I should be treated."*

Environmental re-evaluation seems most prominently reflected in how abused women consider the effects of the abuse on their children.

Adapting the Transtheoretical Model to Intimate Partner Violence

Exhibit III, discussed above, shows the five stages of change and the specific processes of change that are most likely to mediate progression from one stage to another. Drawing from the focus group transcripts, we have suggested several modifications to the model. These are shown in Exhibit IV.



Exibit IV: Application of the Transtheoretical Model to Intimate Partner Violence

The first two stages—precontemplation and contemplation-have been combined into a single overlapping stage. This combined stage has several important characteristics. First, it may be prolonged over a period of many years. It is characterized by ambivalence, with the abused woman cycling back and forth between wanting to change and believing in the status quo. Over time, her weighing of the pros and cons of staying in the relationship gradually prods her towards preparation and action.

The preparation and action stages have also been combined to reflect the sudden nature of the decision many women described. The stimulus control and counter-conditioning processes have been deleted from the model, since they seem less relevant to the abused woman's change process. As discussed above, the process of dramatic relief is shifted to later stages, given the nature of suppressed anger and other emotions. Helping relationships are considered to be critical for both contemplation (new information, emotional support) and action (logistical help), as described above.

The women in this focus group study offered a tapestry of wisdom, information, and strategies to help others still enmeshed in violent relationships. Their stories provided rich information and suggestions for intimate partner violence prevention and intervention. In particular, their recommendations can be used to:

- create health communications messages to help other vulnerable women
- enlighten and inform key institutions whose actions can serve to keep women entrapped or help liberate them from violence
- shape the way society in general thinks about and treats women, especially those who are abused.

Implications of this study are divided into four parts:

- Implications for prevention
- Implication for intervention
- Improving the effectiveness of prevention, intervention, and health communication messages
- Implications for future research

Implications for Prevention

Focus group participants confirmed that intimate partner violence can occur in relationships irrespective of socioeconomic status, education, ethnicity, or locale. In addition, the understanding of risk and protective factors for intimate partner violence has been deepened. Three categories of prevention findings emerge from the study:

- vigilance in identifying early warning signs
- the role of family history of abuse
- reaching early adolescents before they initiate intimate relationships

Each of these categories is discussed in greater detail below:

Vigilance in Identifying Early Warning Signs

Men and women who were abused as children and/or who witnessed violence at home are at greater risk for experiencing violence in their intimate relationships. Hence, there is an urgency to alerting individuals of the early warning signs of intimate partner violence. An appropriate message could be, *"Intimate partner violence can happen to anyone, but you are particularly at risk if you grew up witnessing abuse or being abused. Watch for these early warning signs..."* In the same way that a woman with a family history of breast disease should be vigilant checking for breast lumps, **women with a family history of abuse should be particularly vigilant** in checking for problem behaviors in their intimate relationships.

Violence does not always begin at the start of a relationship but may begin at a particular juncture in the relationship triggered by life events. A number of women reported that as soon as they married, their partner initiated the cycle of violence. Other life events, especially those that pull women's attention away from their partners, such as pregnancy, can precipitate the violence. Once the partner strikes the woman, escalating abuse seems to be predictable and inevitable. In order to frame a prevention message, **the first hit or act of physical violence must be viewed as a violation of a crucial boundary.** If women do not leave at the time of the first transgression, they must at least consider this health and relationship violation a red flag, thus increasing their vigilance and preparedness. However, this can only be accomplished if they understand the cycle of intimate partner abuse.

To minimize the effects of family history of violence and substance abuse requires a massive system of interventions targeting family systems and societal and cultural forces. However, there are steps to take:

- integrating information about intimate partner violence warning **signs** in all women's health resources including magazines, books, television programs, etc.
- developing self-assessment tools of early warning signs, disseminating them in medical offices, emergency rooms, beauty salons, post offices, libraries, grocery stores, and other places women frequent
- offering early parenting classes (0 to 4 years old) that focus on the effects of violence and aggression on children together with proactive parenting skills.

Family History of Abuse

One of the most profound findings in this study is the role of prior history of violence or substance abuse in families of origin. For women and their abusers, family history of violence and alcohol and other substance abuse increases vulnerability to intimate partner violence. From a public health perspective, **identifying early experience with violence as a risk factor** can be equated to identifying women who have a family history of early cardiovascular disease for prevention and early intervention.

The major implication for prevention of intimate partner violence is that any single early warning sign is not necessarily significant or predictive of future abuse. What is critical is the **constellation and escalation of problem behaviors** (i.e.,early warning signs). For instance, many women welcome the attentions of partner who want to be with them every night of the week. This desire to be with one another does not necessarily indicate a propensity for later abuse. However, there is cause for concern when the request to spend time together evolves into excessive possessiveness, control of a woman's whereabouts and actions, and increasingly frequent incidents of jealousy, temper, and accusations. The task then is to **help women recognize the shadowy pattern of behaviors that signal trouble.**

Messages to Early Adolescents

The gender roles and expectations girls and women grow up with and are repeatedly exposed to contribute to their beliefs about relationships, self-worth, assertiveness/submissiveness, and sense of alternatives. All of these factors are critical in protecting or extricating them from a violent relationship. In addition, in early adolescence girls become vulnerable to health-compromising conditions that arise from relationships, including intimate partner violence, adolescent pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases. At this developmental stage, they **lose confidence and self-esteem,** while seeking approval from peers and boys. It is plausible that this period of self doubt sets the stage for increased risk of intimate partner violence, especially if the girl or boy has a family history of abuse or if the girl is naive about relationships.

The focus group participants consistently expressed alarm and concern about the partner abuse that they observed in adolescent relationships where the girls were as young as 11 or 12 years old. Relationship naivete contributes to this mix of risk factors. Many of the focus group participants

married as adolescents and soon became mothers. They did not complete their educations, nor did they ever have experience supporting themselves. Also, a whirlwind romance or rush to commitment was identified as early warning signs of potential abuse. These factors represent a special susceptibility for adolescent girls and require future study.

From a prevention point of view, there are important messages to deliver through schools when young adolescents are among peers. Because of the vulnerability of girls in early adolescence, an important health education role in late elementary school is to:

- teach youth about healthy relationships and identifying early warning signs
- to build self-efficacy by setting limits on inappropriate behavior
- to communicate concern to others.

The march of developmental change does not stop at adolescence. Women in the focus groups described their own adult evolution as it related to intimate partner violence. Emotional and physical abuse that was accepted in their twenties (due to a combination of factors described above), was no longer acceptable to them as they matured. The mitigating factors of children, economic resources, and helping relationships often made a difference in their creating new boundaries for themselves.

Implications for Intervention

There are a number of protective factors that can reduce the exposure, escalation, duration, and possible lethality of intimate partner abuse. These protective factors include:

- no family history of abuse
- completing her education
- being financially independent
- setting appropriate boundaries in a relationship
- developing expectations for a healthy relationship
- being able to detect and react to problems
- having confidence in her self and a feeling of self-worth
- staying connected to family, friends, and work and resisting isolation

One of the key methods to increase her recognition of a problem is to **demonstrate how her abuse affects her children,** and the vulnerability family violence creates in her children's future relationships. Children are vulnerable to repeating abuse in their own relationships with continued exposure to family violence. If a woman becomes aware of this risk to her children through a health communication or health provider message, the benefits of leaving become particularly salient in protecting her children. Because of the significant concern for children that was expressed in all the groups, the recognition that intimate partner abuse has a deleterious effect on her children, now and in later life, may prompt her to take action.

Our findings suggest other ways to increase problem recognition and identification. By providing **information on the early warning signs** of an abusive relationship or characteristics of abusive partners, a woman can increase her awareness through self-assessment. Once she identifies that her partner's behavior is dangerous to them-usually because of increasing brutality, frequency, and escalation of abuse-beliefs about her ability to change him begin to shift. It is essential to **provide information in a safe place** where a woman is not in jeopardy and where she is more likely to be exposed to **the** message **without having to ask for the information and without being singled out.** Several suggestions include:

- including information about intimate partner abuse and hotline numbers in feminine hygiene product boxes and packages
- installing pay phones inside women's restrooms so they can call for help without being in view of the public and more importantly, their abuser
- placing hotline numbers on the back of grocery receipts, which everyone would receive.

Women receive assistance to eliminate or **reduce logistical barriers** such as housing and financial impediments, they then may be able to exit the violent relationship more rapidly and avoid further violence. This is particularly important since the women in these focus groups describe the decisional shift occurring at a particularly lethal stage in the violence. Women describe reaching their **breaking point** when they believe the partner will kill them or they will kill him. Often this realization propels them to prepare and take action in quick succession. This is a time when tangible help and an escape plan are essential.

To Friends & Family:

- Acknowledge the abuse
- Show concern for her welfare
- Offer to help her develop a safety plan

Through the process of self-reevaluation, many women ultimately conclude that they do not deserve to be subjected to emotional and physical abuse. However, they are often at a loss as to *how* to take safe action. At this point, they can take steps to increase self-efficacy in protecting themselves and their children, especially by developing an escape or safety plan. By building their confidence to leave and take care of themselves and their children, they concurrently decrease their "temptation" to stay. It is daunting to decide to leave and risk more dangerous violence during the time they are accumulating enough money or searching for a safe place to run. If women know what resources are available-staying in a friend's home, going to a shelter, getting an emergency loan from an employer-they can take action when they are ready (i.e., when their decisional balance shifts).

If women know what resources are available-staying in a friend's home, going to a shelter, getting an emergency loan from an employer-they can take action when they are ready, that is, when their decisional balance shifts.

One concrete method of eliminating logistical barriers is to **develop media messages that portray domestic violence shelters realistically.** A number of women said that they never considered going to a shelter for help because they thought of them as institutional warehouses where they and their children would lack privacy and confidentiality. By depicting shelters realistically and reassuring women that they can stay for more than a few nights, women can begin to envision a viable alternative to their current situation.

Fostering Helping Relationships

Women in the focus groups offered numerous suggestions to improve the efficiency of relationships. The significant message to family and friends may seem counterintuitive. Rather than constantly urging the woman to leave the relationship, participants suggest acknowledging the abuse, showing concern for her welfare, and offering to help her develop a safety plan. To offer support on the condition that she leaves the relationship further isolates her if she is not ready to take that step. Fearing *"I told you so,"* she may pull away from networks of friends, families and co-workers. Messages about her role in the relationship such as, *"Your job is to make it right or help him,"* or, *"You 've taken vows, and now you must stick to them,"* are counterproductive.

Supportive and no&judgmental friends, family, co-workers, and neighbors are vital to countering the isolation she experiences. They also offer another version of reality to the distorted sense of worth she absorbs from her partners' repeated messages. It is often **in the context of others** that she can see that hitting is not acceptable and that there are alternatives and options for her. Women who do not work and are bound to the home do not experience the benefits of being connected to others, the benefits that isolation destroys.

A key feature to explore is **the** issue of her **proximity** to her family and her sense of alternatives. With the mobility of American society, fewer and fewer people live near their family and can count on their family for help. If the woman makes a sudden decision to leave, her proximity to family members may provide needed options for support. Also, a number of women, especially African-American women, described the essential help and support that their grandmothers or other relatives provide. These intergenerational links may be particularly helpful and less judgmental than parents.

Improving the Response of Social Institutions

This study offers many tangible suggestions about the ways that social institutions-police, courts, medical facilities, religious institutions, schools, the workplace, domestic violence shelters and social service agencies--can help women who are subjected to intimate partner violence. They **offer the potential for protection and interventions.** The question is, "How do these institutions see their intervention role in intimate partner violence?'

We must first consider institutions with which **we all interact.** These institutions can shape a message and provide essential help. For Caucasian women, we find that many of these social institutions are helpful. Less so for African-American women. On the whole, however, key social institutions must **understand the complexities of intimate partner violence** to comprehend 'Why women stay" or "Why women go back to him." Without understanding the hostage-like outcome of intimate partner abuse, services, outreach efforts and policies can be unhelpful or, in the worst case, counterproductive. Abused women then will face unnecessary, and sometimes life-threatening, obstacles.

There are also specific institutions that **abused women seek** out. The quality of the interaction and the assistance provided to a woman the first time she reaches out will influence her sense of options

during other episodes: -Positive interactions will increase her sense of alternatives and confidence to act when she is ready.

For religious institutions: Religious leaders play a vital role in helping women untangle the spiritual, emotional, physical, and logistical mayhem that accompanies intimate partner abuse. From the pulpit and through other venues, religious leaders can help women and their families understand that marriage vows are not eternal when one spouse is abusing or killing the other. They have the power of speech and persuasion to explain that the vows taken pertain to both partners. Further, the notion of "obey" in wedding vows has boundaries and does not encompass emotional and physical abuse.

For police and the legal system: Perhaps no institution is more important to a woman's survival than the police and legal system. Yet, often these are the systems that do not serve women well, especially African-American women. Police help when:

- they take a woman's injuries seriously
- treat the abuse as the crime that it is
- when they help her negotiate the legal system
- make her more aware of their rights and the services available.

They can assist her in preserving the evidence of the crime and direct her to getting an order of protection. Most importantly, they help by not talking the woman out of pressing charges.

When asked about the helping role of police, several women replied, *"He IS the police!"* These women face near impossible hurdles if their spouse or **partner is a law enforcement. They** describe a system of collusion among fellow officers that leaves them and their children particularly vulnerable.

Women who were in **the military** or whose spouse was in the military a particularly vulnerable population described the code of silence that increased their isolation and ability to seek help. Both police departments and branches of the military must refuse to tolerate abusive behaviors among their ranks. These two social institutions are conferred with the most legitimate control and power in our society. The result is that they may attract personnel who not only relish these elements of

their professional role, but who let them legitimate control in one situation spill over into their domestic life.

For hospitals and medical personnel: While a few women talked about help received from emergency rooms or physicians, it was striking that more women did not identify hospitals and medical personnel as key helping institutions. Like other social institutions discussed above, the medical system was not described as helpful to African-American women. There is no more immediate opportunity to help victims of intimate partner violence surmount the psychological barriers to leaving an abusive relationship than the medical system. Physicians, in particular, were perceived as credible by most women. A well-placed and supportive intervention here is most likely to save a woman from future abuse.

For domestic violence shelters: The main information gained about the helpfulness of domestic violence shelters is **that** many women do not seek them out because of the image they have of shelters. Women have an image of domestic violence shelters as they imagine homeless shelters or emergency shelters as large-overcrowded places that offer no privacy and little safety. By portraying the shelter with private space and an emphasis on confidentiality and safety, women will be more likely to seek this important help. It must be noted that not one African-American woman mentioned getting help from shelters. This issue requires further attention and study.

For the workplace: Workplace human resource offices can help develop ways that co-workers can respond when someone is victimized. Also, policies such as emergency loans reduce logistical barriers when the woman is ready to leave her dangerous home situation.

For schools: Schools have a less direct, but equally important role to play as other social institutions. When children and youth are exhibiting troubling behavior or poor school work, school personnel must look beyond signs of child abuse. They must also question the tenor of the home environment, and the chaos created by being in a home shadowed with violence and substance abuse. While school personnel might believe that family violence is beyond their purview, they can come to understand the importance of family intervention on the academic performance of children and youth. As described earlier, there are key health education

interventions that can help prepare young people for healthful relationships. Women in the focus groups commented that schools must teach about "safe relationships" not simply "safe sex."

To strengthen protective factors in all social institutions, health communications campaigns and specific programs can increase awareness, training, and, policies. Both men and social institutions must be held accountable for their actions or inaction. Abusers are held accountable when they perpetrate child abuse, not so abuse of their intimate partners. Social institutions are not held accountable, especially for African-American women. Without societal accountability, our society gives *de facto* permission for violence. Without strong institutional support, many women will have no option but to live in fear and pain.

Improving the Effectiveness of Prevention, Intervention, and Health Communication Messages

The focus group study presents important information to increase the effectiveness of intimate partner violence prevention, interventions, and health communication messages. These member to tested include:

- Respect where the woman is in the change process and provide her with as much autonomy and control over decisions as possible: Help her to develop an emergency plan to use whenever she is ready.
- Respect a woman's decisions as rational in the context of her situation: Blaming her for the abuse or for not leaving only isolates her further.
- Do not hide or avoid acknowledging the abuse: If you hear it, call the police. Let her know you are aware of it and are making yourself available to help whenever she is ready.
- To shift the decisional balance from staying to leaving, it may be helpful to reframe her viewpoint: For instance, if she believes that God will help her endure her marriage, she can also know that God will help her leave and be safe.
- Use images identified by women such as *"walking on eggshells"* as key communication messages; asking, *"Is this you? You may be an abused woman."* Other compelling messages include *"Her partner is a time bomb, and she doesn't know when he will go off"* or it is a *"Hopeless task to change him or try to make him better."*

- Focus on behaviors rather than labels. *"Women do not see themselves as battered"* but can recognize a problem behavior pattern such as "Does *your partner do this to you?" "Top IO ways to identify an abuser."* Images such as an "incremental slide," "staircase of violence," "it begins with belittling," *"top 10 ways to identify if your relationship is problematic"* may be persuasive.

- Show success stories on the media and though public service announcements. Women are currently faced with negative images and want to hear success stories (the one who got away).

- Develop reinforcing messages to continue maintenance and prevent relapse. When many women leave, they may no longer experience abuse; however, the pain of the violence takes longer to recede as they struggle financially and emotionally. Health messages about early warning signs and messages that reinforce her decision will help prevent relapse.

Implications For Future Research

A number of topics generated by these findings warrant further research. These include:

- the impact of witnessing or experiencing violence during childhood
- early adolescent risk factors for intimate violence prevention
- relationship history (age and degree of violence at first incident, frequency and severity of battering incidents, involvement of children, type of battering)
- escalation history (precursors, point(s) in the relationship where it escalated, form of escalation, reactions to escalation)
- perceptions of violence in the relationship, particularly attributions of fault and responsibility
- methods that shift a woman's decisional balance toward leaving the violent relationship
- resurgence of abuse in relationships that were once violent.
- violence cessation (time since leaving last violent relationship, subsequent contacts with ex-partner, expectations for future relationships)
- risk and protective factors for women or spouses in police departments and the military
- risk and protective factors for Hispanic, Asian women, immigrants and refugees
- risk and protective factors of men for intimate partner violence

This study focused on women who had successfully left violent relationships. Our recruitment yielded only a handful of woman who had been able to end the violence and remain in the

relationship, and did not shed adequate light on this issue. However, we have some clues from the groups that warrant further **research on the resurgence of abuse in relationships that were** once **violent.**

An African-American urban woman from Pennsylvania described how she created a non-violent equilibrium in her marriage through the **threat of retaliation,** declaring, "*If I end up in the emergency room again, he '11 be in the bed next to me."* Also, women who remained in previously violent relationships had disturbing reactions to many comments from women who had left. Several women sat crying during the conversations, and could not summon a reply to the participants who expressed disbelief that the violence described in their relationship could be extinguished. Our study team surmises that many of these women are still at risk. This conjecture assumes that the perpetrator and the family have not had extensive and effective treatment, and arose because women still with their previously abusive partners provided no reasons or indicators that the man or the relationship had changed in substantive ways. Their relationship may be in a lengthy hiatus from violence, like a bear in hibernation who can be expected to awaken in the spring. Stated otherwise, it may be that in these relationships the cycle of violence has a more protracted trajectory, and the women may experience a resumption of abuse.

Conclusion

The public health concern about intimate partner violence touches on all facets of human spirit and relationships: gender roles; cultural beliefs and values; parenting practices; the sanctity of marriage vows and commitments; and the structure and effectiveness of myriad social institutions. Intimate partner violence is prevalent, often life-threatening, and contributes vastly to the morbidity and mortality of its victims. Violence, like other life-limiting diseases and conditions with behavioral elements, is preventable and amenable to intervention. Prevention and early intervention will not only save lives now, but will prevent the *"generational curse"* from damaging future generations.

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In Her Own Words

A Focus Group Study of Risk and Protective Factors in Intimate Partner Violence

on behalf of the

National Center for Injury Prevention and Control
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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February 4, 1997

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In Her Own Words is an important study in its capacity to change the world view of those touched by it. The stories and events described by these formerly abused women-experiences of triumph, defeat, shame, resoluteness-put a face on the statistics reported in quantitative studies. These data make personal and real the nightly news reports about intimate partner violence. The study team extends our heart-felt gratitude to the 168 women who participated in the focus groups--opening old emotional wounds and sharing private anguish in order to use their experiences to help other women and families.

There are many to thank in seeing this study completed. Nicole Lezin, as the original study project manager, applied her considerable talents to the early phases of this work, and was crucial to the application of the Transtheoretical Model to Intimate Partner Violence. Her contribution to conceptualizing and communicating the findings is especially appreciated. The focus group moderators, Barbara Hairston and Martha Zipper, were expert at eliciting the needed data in the focus groups while respecting the privacy of the participants. Kira Sue Chitwood and Nicola Dawkins were key contributors to this study, and were especially instrumental in the coding, analysis, interpretation, and writing processes. Both brought their disciplinary expertise and perspective to the study, helping to assure that the voices of these women will be heard. Lela Baughman, Macro Senior Manager, kept a steady eye on the progress, complexities, and implications of this project. In addition, Jodi Prochaska and Natasha Thompson were of great assistance in the recruitment and implementation of the focus groups. While a number of Macro staff contributed to the completion of this report, Antoinette Buchanan is especially thanked for her good spirit.

The Macro study team applauds the National Center of Injury Prevention and Control of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for providing leadership for national violence prevention policy and intervention efforts. The vision and research agenda of this group of scientists makes our Nation's families safer. The study's Technical Monitors, Drs. Lynn Short, Pamela McMahon, and Gene Shelley of the CDC's Family and Intimate Partner Violence Team in the Division of Violence Prevention, provided stewardship of this research and foresight in crafting a meaningful research agenda. They are guides of a national research effort that looks not only at the characteristics of the battered and batterers, but explores the nature of complex interpersonal and familial relationships and the social institutions that can help them.

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February 1997

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Her Own Words

A Focus Group Study of Risk and Protective Factors in Intimate Partner Violence

Public health's focus on intimate partner violence reflects a growing awareness of how violence undermines the human spirit and creates an endless spiral of psychological distress, physical pain, injury, and sometimes death. The opportunity, however, for preventing the occurrence or escalation of intimate partner violence offers tremendous payoffs for abused women, their partners, and their children. Preventing intimate partner violence is a monumental challenge involving individual and societal views of gender-roles, cultural beliefs and values, parenting practices, religious convictions, and the organization and response of myriad social institutions. To help meet this challenge, this study presents the views of 168 women who endured and ultimately survived abusive intimate relationships.

> ***And then you let one little thing go, you think, 'you know everybody is human.' You know, don't make a big deal out of it. You gradually stop kind of checking into the reality areas of your life that used to keep you balanced, used to keep you kind of 'What's going on here?' And so it's systematic. /t's a little bit at a time and then by the time you get something is wrong, you're in it so deep that you can't get out...***
>
> ***Caucasian urban woman,* Georgia**

I. THE PROBLEM

To most outside observers, the behavior of abused women seems inexplicable. Belittled, controlled, and assaulted, they react not with the indignation and outrage we expect, but with mystifying acceptance. From our vantage point outside the relationship, we are perplexed by the abused woman's resignation to her fate, by the absence of anger, the seeming tolerance of intolerable affronts. Often, our reaction to the plight of a woman trapped in an abusive relationship is some version of "Why does she stay?"

Intimate partner violence is a battle for **power and control** over another person. The weapons of violence-epithets, threats, slaps, punches, kicks, rape-are the means to capture the prize of control, not ends in themselves. The abused woman's sense of **self worth** becomes a central element of the struggle. Whether the abused woman's self esteem is already low before she meets her abuser or whether he systematically erodes whatever self esteem she has, she is left without the protective layer of self worth that sends up red flags of warning. *"By the time he hit me,"* abused women report, *"I thought I deserved it."*

Research over the past decade has shed a great deal of light on the dynamics of abusive relationships. At the same time, violence between intimate partners has been the subject of increased media attention, both from news organizations and the entertainment industry. However, preventive interventions remain scarce in comparison to the growth in shelters and other supports that women can turn to as they seek refuge or escape from the violence.

II. OBJECTIVES

This study was designed to provide insights into how African-American and Caucasian women in urban and rural settings perceive the factors that placed them at risk for an abusive relationship, as well as the factors that protected them from further violence during and after the relationship. *In Her Own Words: A Focus Group Study of Risk and Protective Factors in Intimate Partner Violence* presents what abused women tell us about why they stay, what increases their risk of violence, and how the violence ends. The more known about these issues, the more effective public health interventions can be in assisting women to end violence against them and in improving the response of social systems designed to protect us all.

Prochaska's and DiClemente's Transtheoretical Model (also known as Stages of Change) served as the conceptual framework for the study.' The model depicts a sequence of five stages-precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance-that culminate in lasting behavior change. This model of behavior change was used to gain insights into how women perceived, coped with, and eventually ended the violence they experienced. As in other applications, the model allows researchers to define and understand the sequence of change, and to determine which types of interventions would be most helpful to women at varying stages of violent relationships.

This study was designed to learn:

- the nature and scope of violent and abusive relationships
- early warning signs of violence
- triggers to violence
- why women stay in violent relationships
- what makes or helps women decide to end the violence
- what and who supports them in ending the violence
- barriers to leaving the relationship or ending the violence
- advice to women who had been hit for the first time
- what women know now that they wish they had known earlier
- messages to other women and to society

'Prochaska, J and DiClemente, C.. 1992. Stages of Change in the Modification of Problem Behaviors. In: ***Progress in Behavior Modification, 28,*** 183-218.

These findings will be empirically tested, in a national telephone survey. Specific information on the risk and protective factors identified by abused women in these studies will be used to design interventions and communication messages, as well as to highlight areas where further research is warranted.

III. METHODOLOGY

Twenty-two focus groups were conducted to explore the risk and protective factors that African-American and Caucasian women identified in examining their own relationship histories, as well as specific strategies that women have used to eliminate violence from their relationships and protect themselves. Focus groups were chosen as the most appropriate data collection technique to capture the nuances and dimensions of responses about the abuse process. In addition, focus groups offered the advantage of group interaction to corroborate or amplify the statements of individual respondents.

Focus groups were conducted in urban and rural areas in Georgia, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Oregon. Participants were recruited with the assistance of local coordinators in each city or town where the groups were held. The coordinators recruited participants by placing fliers and newspaper advertisements asking,

> ***Have you left a violent relationship where you were repeatedly hit, slapped, punched, or kicked? Are you in a relationship now that used to be violent?***

These recruitment print pieces were placed where adult women were likely to gather, such as beauty salons, social service agencies, community colleges, health clinics, and women's restrooms. At every stage of recruitment, confirmation, and participation, the safety of participants was of paramount concern to the study team. For example, fliers did not divulge the location of the focus groups nor did answering machine messages, directions, and other materials mention the nature of the discussion.

The coordinators screened potential participants to ensure that they met the study criteria. Participants had to be 18 years of age or older, have experienced physical violence in an intimate relationship with a male partner, and experienced no violence for at least six months prior to the focus group discussion date. A small stipend and child care were provided as incentives for participation. Participants also received information on local resources available for victims of intimate partner violence.

Trained moderators guided the focus group discussions by asking questions on definitions of violence, early warning signs, triggers, why women stayed and left, who helped them, what advice they would give to other abused women, and what messages should be communicated to society. In addition, participants were asked to complete an adjective card sorting exercise that described how they felt before or early in the relationship, during the violence, and once the violence had ended.

Text analysis software (Tally) was used to code transcripts of the audio taped focus group discussions. The codes encompassed categories for descriptions of violence, risk and protective factors for partner abuse, and subsets within responses to each set of questions. Each transcript was coded by two different reviewers to enhance inter-rater reliability. The text analysis software allowed reporting of focus group data by discussion topic as well as by race/ethnicity (African-American and Caucasian) and location (urban or rural). Results were analyzed for prevalence of responses (for example, responses that occurred only or predominantly in one type of group) as well as for the context of each quote. In addition, the transcripts and adjective card responses were analyzed according to the stages and processes of change as defined in the Transtheoretical Model.

One hundred and sixty-eight (168) women participated in the study. They ranged in age from 18 to 60, and reported being out of the abusive relationship from six months to 2.5 years. Rural women comprised 45 percent of respondents (n = 76); urban women comprised 55 percent of respondents (n = 92). Fifty-three (53) percent of participants were African-American; 47 percent were Caucasian.

IV. FINDINGS

Although some differences were found between African-American women and Caucasian women and between urban and rural groups, the most striking finding was the similar contours described by women from all walks of life as they examined the abuse in their pasts.

Nature and scope of violent and abusive relationships

Confirming the results of previous research, focus group participants noted that while the violence and the injuries incurred are detrimental, the **long-term effects** of emotional and physical abuse are often even worse. The constant fear of violence and uncertainty about when it would occur or how severe it might be led women to describe a terrifying and paralyzing **climate** of violence. Stalking during and after the relationship is only the most graphic of a wide range of behaviors that reflected often extreme attempts to control the abused woman's actions and reactions. A wide range of psychologically and physically abusive acts were described by focus group participants, including abuse not only of themselves but also of children and pets. Many of these acts had in common **escalation over time** and increasing **lethality.**

Triggers to violence

Although participants each listed numerous and varied triggers, most concluded that **anything** could be a trigger to violence-and that this realization was a significant contributor to the terror, fear, and desperation they felt in their relationships. A wide range of trivial and serious triggers were mentioned, including jealousy, fights, noisy children, unsatisfactory or late meals, financial worries, or stresses at work. Some women mentioned that their own successes and independence were important triggers to their partners' violence. African-American urban women referred more frequently to violence occurring in response to standing up to or "talking back" to their

partners. Even more common was the link in all participants' minds between **substance abuse and violence.** For many participants, this association led them to focus their efforts on ending their partners' drinking or drug use.

Early warning signs

When asked to reflect on early warning signs of an abusive relationship, participants agreed on a number of problem behaviors. While there was consensus on the actual signs, there was skepticism that most women could heed these signs early enough in the relationship. Paradoxically, several of the potential warning signs-charm, whirlwind romances, possessiveness-were consistent with what many women expected and desired in a relationship. Moreover, any single early warning sign is not necessarily significant or predictive of future abuse. What was critical to participants was the **constellation** and **escalation of problem behaviors.** Many women also described **factors that they brought to the relationship:** low or non-existent self esteem, violence as the norm in their homes and communities, youth and inexperience in relationships, and low standards or expectations of relationships.

Participants spoke at length about their abusive partners, particularly the partner's own history of violence at home and its almost inevitable replication in adult relationships. The most common word used to describe abusive partners was "controlling." **Control** manifested itself as extreme possessiveness and jealousy, often leading to stalking, mistrust, and constant accusations of infidelity. Control also included attempts to direct and shape the woman's behavior and to **isolate** her from family and friends. An African-American woman recalls:

> ***He was trying to keep me to himself. He* never wanted me *to go anywhere. My* mom *would* call, "What are *you on the phone talking to her for?" Because she's my mother, you know... when he gets home he wants his dinner cooked..&* was *all about him, what he wanted.***

Focus group participants pointed to various clues about abusive men that could be detected in his **insecurities,** the **ways he treated others,** and **blaming others** for everything that went wrong. Most insidiously, abusers blamed their victims for the abuse itself. Other markers included **extreme charm** alternating with **explosive rage,** or a Jekyll and Hyde personality-a foreshadowing of the cycle of abuse and remorse that followed.

Why women stay

Women stayed in abusive relationships for a host of complex reasons, including abiding love of their partners, commitment to wedding vows, desire to provide a two-parent home for their children, financial and emotional dependence, and raw fear of the repercussions of leaving. Responses generally clustered into two broad categories: **positive and hopeful** reasons on the one hand (such as hoping their partners could and would change), and **negative** ones on the other (such as feeling trapped, ashamed, and/or hopeless that any alternatives were open to her). The distinction between the two types of reasons is critical to understanding how women come to assess their readiness to take action. "Why I stay" is a qualitatively different stage of readiness than "why I cannot leave," with different implications for possible interventions. It is important to note that the decision to stay or leave was often a highly **rational choice-one** that carefully

and accurately took into account. the pros and cons of the situation, particularly the often lethal consequences of leaving.

Why women leave

Focus group participants often described the decision to leave the violence as reaching a **breaking point.** Their responses depicted a **sudden shift** in how they saw their partners and themselves. Self re-evaluation, **loving themselves,** and considering their own needs were mentioned often as important precursors-points of view that were previously unfamiliar to many of the focus group participants. The escalation of abuse to a point of **lethality** was a decisive factor, either because it caused women to fear for their own lives, to want to end their lives, or to fear that they would kill their partners. **Children** were a powerful motivator for leaving as well, particularly as women became more and more concerned that their children were being affected by witnessing the violence, mimicking it, or being abused themselves. The descriptions of why women stayed and why they left pointed to a shift in how the pros and cons of staying in the relationship were weighed, with the realization that the violence would continue and escalate.

Roles of other relationships and institutions

Focus group participants chronicled a series of missed opportunities, misguided attempts to help that backfired, and outright hostility or counterproductive and harmful behaviors from individuals and institutions they turned to for help. In every group, some women declared that **no one** was instrumental in helping them leave, in part reflecting the isolation that is typical of abused women. However, this also reflects the lack of progress in having intimate partner violence detected and confronted by the legal, law enforcement, and medical professionals who are most ideally suited to intervene. The **police** and the **legal system's policies and practices** were most often cited as abetting abusive relationships. These two parts of the judicial system were viewed as unsympathetic and even punitive to women who are abused and simultaneously lenient or misguided in their treatment of abusers. As one African-American urban woman described:

> ***I called and I said to the police, I said, 'He's following me.' . . . And they said, 'Until he touches you, we can't do anything.' I said, 'When he kills me dead, then my children can call.' . . . So what are my rights? 'You can call us if he comes back.* But by the time he's in my house, cause he broke in one time, by the time he's in my house I got no telephone, 'cause that's the first thing he cuts is the telephone. How am I supposed to call? And they say that this is how it is. I've got no sympathy, nothing from our local law enforcement. Nothing.***

Prominent among missed opportunities was the **lack of involvement of medical staff and settings.** Helpful medical personnel were rarely mentioned by Caucasian women and never by African-American women. The **church** was considered an indirectly enabling force because of teachings and beliefs to adhere to marriage vows at any cost, combined with social and religious censure of divorce. Both the **abuser's and the victim's families** played roles as enablers of the abusive relationship, either by ignoring clear signs of violence, urging women to return and "try again," or concurring that she must be doing something to trigger the abuse.

Both **friends** and **relatives** were described as unhelpful in their reluctance to get involved, failing to offer concrete help, and/or making judgmental comments.

In contrast to the lack of support described above, many women spoke with deep gratitude about those who had assisted them at critical junctures. Honest and caring **friends** and **relatives** were mentioned most frequently as sources of support and encouragement. Co-workers, members of the abuser's family, and neighbors were also cited, although far less frequently. While information and emotional support were valued, **concrete** assistance---transportation, money, a place to stay-lifted the final logistical barriers to leaving an abusive relationship. African-American women specifically mentioned the role of their **spiritual faith** in helping them cope with and overcome violence in their relationships. Although this often was described as a personal (for example, through prayer) rather than an institutional source of help, churches as institutions also were mentioned. **Other than the role of the family and church, African-American women were silent on the subject of helpful social institutions.** For Caucasian women, shelters were mentioned most frequently as a helpful social institution. Similarly, Caucasian women cited counseling as a source of support.

What women wish they had known

Looking back, women wished they had been able to believe that **someone other than their abuser could love them.** They also would have wanted to know about the warning signs of abuse and about the dynamics of abuse, particularly that there was nothing they could do to stop it and that years of efforts to do so ultimately would be futile. Finally, women would have wanted to know more about the **resources available to them.**

Advice to other women

Participants were asked what advice they would give to a friend or relative who had been hit by her partner for the first time. The emphatic message by most participants was to **leave the relationship** because the man who hits once is certain to do so again, and to become more violent over time. The sometimes spirited dissent was not necessarily regarding whether or not to leave, but whether to wait for a second occurrence. In either case, most women suggested a **strong response at the first sign of abuse,** signaling that such behavior would not be tolerated. They most often mentioned calling the police and filing a complaint so that a record of abuse is established and documented. If a woman returns after a first incident, she should clearly indicate her intent to leave if a second incident occurs, and follow through. Despite the strength and near unanimity of these sentiments, **respondents agreed that they would not have taken this advice if it had been offered to them.**

Messages to society

Focus group participants stressed four key messages to society at large. First, they felt strongly that **elementary and middle-school girls and boys need to learn that intimate partner abuse is wrong.** Youth also need the skills to detect abuse and the tools and wherewithal to demand higher standards in their relationships. Participants believed that imparting this

information to young girls and boys would serve as a general **preventive measure** and could also **counter messages at home** about violence as the norm in relationships. Another powerful message that surfaced in the focus group discussions was that **men face little censure from the courts, their peers, or their families** for their abusive behavior. Abused women want society to know how poorly the legal system has served them, and to express outrage by that knowledge. They also want individuals to become involved--to **know the warning signs for abuse** and **to intervene.** Focus group participants also discussed various **channels for communicating information on resources available to abused women. While** they wanted this information to be widely available (through television programs, radio talk shows, yellow pages, grocery stores, and doctor's offices), participants also cited that the abused woman's safety was a key consideration, since it could be dangerous for her to keep materials with her or at her home. A suggested solution to this problem was offering an easily memorized telephone number that women could call during an emergency, without having to look it up.

V. APPLYING THE TRANSTHEORETICAL MODEL TO INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

The Transtheoretical Model's descriptions of stages of change and the processes needed to move from one stage to the next have held true across a wide variety of behaviors. An emphasis on incremental, sequential steps has turned the focus from unrealistically grandiose behavior change to a series of less ambitious steps that slowly, but more surely, lead to lasting change-essential for ending intimate partner violence.

Applying this model to violence between intimate partners raises challenging issues. The model reflects *intentional and individual* behavior change. In contrast, the cessation of intimate partner violence introduces the dynamic of a relationship between two people, in which one person exerts physical and psychological force over the other. In this case, the "problem behavior" is the partner's violence, and **the stages of change that a woman moves through in response to this problem are reactions to someone else's actions.**

Another challenge is how the ultimate behavior change goal is defined. Also, for abused women, as with other populations contemplating complex changes, the model's time frames are generally too short. Both the pace of change and the complexity of recovery or maintenance must be accounted for in adapting the model to intimate partner violence.

Despite these potential limitations, the Transtheoretical Model provides insights into the sequence and duration of steps that abused women experience. These insights are essential to designing interventions that match the intricate psychology of abused women, and that can therefore succeed in helping her acknowledge the violence in her intimate relationships.

Precontemplation

In other applications of the Transtheoretical Model, precontemplation is sometimes characterized as denial or minimizing of the problem behavior. Many abused women deny or

minimize the problem of abuse, especially when the abuse is primarily emotional. Moreover, a key feature of the cycle of violence—violent episodes followed by calm or "honeymoon" periods-reinforces denial. However, denying or minimizing the violence in their relationships is facilitated by the abusive partners discrediting the abused woman's version of events, questioning her sanity, and accusing her of imagining her assaults. The role of the abusive partner in perpetuating a stage of precontemplation is a critical difference with other applications of the model, and also suggests opportunities for intervention.

For some abused women, their **lack of awareness centers not on the violence itself, but on their sense of who is responsible for it.** Again, with reinforcement from their partners ("Why *did you make me do this to* you?"), many abused women believe that they trigger the violence through their own behavior. This, in turn, leads them to another marker of precontemplation: **they believe that the violence is controllable.** Unlike many other behavior change challenges, however, the behavior that they believe can be controlled is not their own, but their abuser's.

Like other types of precontemplators, abused women are reluctant to acknowledge and discuss the problem with others. Participants reported that they feared the "I told you so" reaction from friends and relatives who had warned them about their partner's shortcomings. At the other extreme, some women feared that no one would believe them, because their abusers had such a different image (charming, affable, etc.) outside the relationship. Similarly, protecting outside images of a "perfect relationship" was important to some women. Others reported the shame they felt in admitting that they had tolerated the abuse. Still others faced outright hostility from those they approached for support. The outside confirmation that they must have done something to provoke the abuse substantiated the abuser's version of events and discouraged abused women from seeking help.

An important characteristic of precontemplation is the belief that the pros or benefits of the behavior (i.e., remaining in the relationship) outweigh its negative consequences (i.e., suffering abuse). For abused women, the weighing of pros and cons occurs against a dramatic backdrop of dubious pros-financial independence, single status-and extremely adverse consequences being alone, losing children and shelter, and facing threats of escalated violence. Her partner's influence in perpetuating these beliefs cannot be underestimated *("No one will want you," "I'm going to take* you *to court to get the kids.")*. If an abused woman's own safety and survival are taken into account as the overriding "pro" or "con," her decision to stay seems much more **rational.** Moreover, the vast gulf between pros and cons also helps explain why abused women hover in some version of precontemplation for so long before contemplating or taking action. Also, this gulf between pros and cons also explains why **individuals in the precontemplation phase are least responsive to interventions.**

Contemplation

As the abused woman considers the prospects for change, she repeats the weighing of pros and cons in the precontemplation phase. However, the balance between pros and cons begins to shift. For example, many of the focus group participants noted that they **were very young** when

they became involved with their abusers and had no knowledge or experience to alert them to the fact that violence and control were outside the parameters of healthy intimate relationships.

As the abuse continues, women may find it more difficult to feel reassured by the honeymoon period, particularly if the violence escalates in frequency and/or severity. In addition, continued abuse takes its toll physically and psychologically, not only on the abused woman but on her children as well. A re-evaluation of the abusive behavior and attention to these consequences, mingled with less and less faith that the situation has any chance of improving, can move the abused woman toward contemplating her options. When she does contemplate her options, however, she confronts the same barriers she faced in the precontemplation phase. In fact, she may feel even more powerless to act because her isolation, shame, and lack of resources are likely to have worsened over time. The **lack of options and support** was a common theme in the focus group discussions.

Preparation and Action

In the **action** stage, individuals take overt steps to change the behavior. As with the other stages, however, it must be reiterated that the preparations and actions of abused women depend heavily on the counteractions (actual or threatened) of their abusers.

In contrast to the prolonged, ambivalent stages of precontemplation and contemplation, abused women reported relatively **sudden preparation and action.** A critical factor in preparation and action is the safety and well-being of children. Part of the transition to preparation and action is **regaining the sense of self** that they feel was lost or embattled during the violence. Women described waking up, seeing through new eyes, a lifting of a fog that obscured the reality of their situation.

For abused women, **readiness to** change--essential to successful preparation and action-seems to include the dual dimensions of psychological readiness and logistical readiness. In many cases, the intense psychological readiness to leave is achieved before the logistical arrangements are in place.

Maintenance

For abused women, the maintenance stage requires determination and resolve, as it does for others seeking to change behaviors. However, the requisite determination and resolve are vital at a point in time when the abused woman's resources are often depleted. **After taking action, she is literally in recovery from her ordeal.** Several women in the focus groups used the term "healing" to describe themselves after the violent relationship. Her formidable psychological and logistical tasks can include bolstering her sense of self, dealing with the effects of depression, developing and maintaining financial independence (often for the first time), re-creating a home, dealing with the reactions of children and others, and often contact with the abuser as well. Another important task is relapse prevention-avoiding the return to damaging relationship patterns and situations for both the relationship she has left and future intimate relationships.

The damage done to an abused woman, often over a period of years, is not easily or rapidly repaired. One woman described how she still slept with a pillow over her head to protect herself from beatings-24 years after leaving her abuser. In addition to instinctive fear of their former abusers, many of the women were apprehensive and skeptical about future relationships.

Despite these qualms, most of the women did describe themselves as hopeful, optimistic, calm, confident, and successful. Even as they struggled with financial difficulties, they savored the freedom from violence. Many had learned hard lessons, and were proud of their new-found independence.

Summary: Transtheoretical Model and Abused Women

Based on these analyses, we suggest that for abused women, the first two stages—precontemplation and contemplation-are combined into a single overlapping stage that may be prolonged over a period of many years. Over time, her weighing of the pros and cons of staying in the relationship gradually shifts her towards preparation and action. In contrast to the prolonged ambivalence of precontemplation and contemplation, preparation and action stages are quite sudden for many abused women. Once they have achieved psychological readiness, the removal of logistical barriers such as housing, children, or employment can move them to immediate action.

VI. IMPLICATIONS

The women who participated in this focus group study offered wisdom, information, and strategies to help:

- create health communications messages to help other vulnerable women
- enlighten and inform key institutions whose actions can serve to keep women entrapped or help liberate them from violence
- shape the way society in general thinks about and treats women, especially those who are abused.

Implications for Prevention

We learned from the women in our focus groups that intimate partner violence can occur in relationships irrespective of socioeconomic status, education, ethnicity, or locale. Three categories of special prevention implications emerge from the study:

- vigilance in identifying early warning signs
- the role of family history of abuse
- reaching early adolescents before they initiate intimate relationships

Vigilance in Identifying Early Warning Signs

This study reminds us that anyone is at risk for intimate partner violence. Any single early warning sign-charm, whirlwind romance, possessiveness, criticism, testing limits, blaming others-is not necessarily significant nor predictive of future abuse. What is critical is the constellation and escalation of problem behaviors, especially those that control, shame, and isolate women. Prevention efforts assisting girls and women to identify early warning signs, apply these signs to their relationships, and act on high standards for intimate relationships can help stem the tide of intimate partner abuse.

The Role of Family History of Abuse

One of the most profound findings in this study is the role of prior history of violence or substance abuse in families of origin. For women and their abusers, family history of violence and abuse of alcohol and other substances increases vulnerability to intimate partner violence, and limits the ability to detect early warning signs. If a man or woman was abused as a child and/or witnessed violence at home, key health communication messages might include,

> ***Intimate partner violence can happen to anyone, but you are particularly at risk if you grew up witnessing violence in your home or being abused. Watch for these early warning signs...***

From a public health perspective, identifying early experience with violence as a risk factor is equivalent to identifying women who have a family history of breast cancer for prevention and early intervention.

Reaching Early Adolescents

The gender roles and expectations that girls and women absorb from family and society contribute to their beliefs about relationships, self-worth, assertiveness/submissiveness, and expectations. All of these factors are critical in protecting or extricating them from a violent relationship. In early adolescence, girls lose confidence and self-esteem, while seeking approval from peers and boys. Factors such as relationship naivete, early marriage, and whirlwind romance for adolescent girls are areas of susceptibility and require future study. From a prevention point of view, an important health education role in late elementary school is teaching youth about healthy relationships, early warning signs, setting limits on inappropriate behavior, and communicating concern to others.

Implications for Intervention

A number of modifiable protective factors for women (such as completing her education, setting appropriate boundaries in a relationship, staying connected to family and friends) can reduce the exposure, escalation, duration, and possible lethality of intimate partner abuse. Even when protective factors are absent or insufficient, prevention and intervention programs can make a difference by:

- tipping the decisional balance from staying to leaving before greater morbidity is incurred

- fostering helping relationships to provide tangible and emotional support
- improving the response of social institutions

Each is discussed below.

Tipping the Decisional Balance

The Stages of Change model, as applied to intimate partner violence, suggests that a woman's readiness is an essential precursor to her leaving a violent relationship. Efforts to help her leave before she is ready are not only futile, but may result in further isolation and immobilization. Rather, the aim should be to tip the decisional balance from staying to leaving before greater morbidity is incurred. Reducing women's psychological barriers requires interventions that help her to recognize the severity of the violence, change her beliefs about herself and her relationships, and build confidence to be able to leave and care for herself and her children. Strategies to help her recognize the effects of abuse include:

- Demonstrating how her abuse affects her children, not only currently but in terms of presenting a damaged model for future intimate relationships

- Providing information safely on the early warning signs of an abusive relationship or characteristics of abusive partners, particularly the escalation over time

Logistical barriers, such as lack of housing and finances, can be countered by making information on available resources and alternatives more widely known, including the necessary components of a safety plan, staying in a friend's home, going to a shelter, or getting an emergency loan from an employer.

Fostering Helping Relationships

Women in the focus groups offered numerous suggestions to improve helping relationships. Rather than urging the woman to leave the relationship, women suggest that family and friends **acknowledge the abuse, show concern for her welfare, and offer to help her develop a safety plan.** A critical element is to **respect the abused woman's own time line.** Offering support to abused women on the condition that they leave the relationship further isolates them if they are not ready to take that step. Supportive and non-judgmental friends, family, coworkers, and neighbors offer another version of reality, rather than the distortions she absorbs from her partner. It is often in the context of others that the abused woman can see that violence is not acceptable and that there are alternatives and options available.

Improving the Response of Social Institutions

This study offers many tangible suggestions about the ways that social institutions-police, courts, medical facilities, religious institutions, schools, workplace, shelters and social service agencies-can help women who are subjected to intimate partner violence. They offer the

potential for protection and interventions. The question-and, often, the problem-is, how these institutions see their role for intervention in intimate partner violence.

Institutions with which we all interact can shape a powerful message and provide essential help. On the whole, however, key social institutions must understand the complexities of intimate partner violence to comprehend "Why women stay" or "Why women go back to him."

There are also specific institutions that abused women seek out. The quality of the interaction and assistance provided the first time women reach out to these agencies and services will influence women's sense of options during other episodes. Positive interactions will increase her sense of alternatives and confidence to act when she is ready. The report offers key recommendations for the workplace, religious institutions, the police and legal system, hospital and medical personnel, domestic violence shelters, and schools.

Implications for Future Research

A number of topics generated by these findings warrant further research. These include:

- the impact of witnessing or experiencing violence during childhood
- early adolescent risk factors for intimate violence prevention
- relationship history (age and degree of violence at first incident, frequency and severity of battering incidents, involvement of children, type of battering)
- escalation history (precursors, point(s) in the relationship where it escalated, form of escalation, reactions to escalation)
- perceptions of violence in the relationship, particularly attributions of fault and responsibility
- methods that shift a woman's decisional balance toward leaving the violent relationship
- resurgence of abuse in relationships that were once violent.
- violence cessation (time since leaving last violent relationship, subsequent contacts with ex-partner, expectations for future relationships)
- risk and protective factors for women or spouses in police departments and the military
- risk and protective factors for Hispanic, Asian women, immigrants and refugees

Perhaps most significantly, these results raise questions for future study about risk and protective factors of men who perpetrate intimate partner violence.

VII. CONCLUSION

In Her Own Words is a qualitative research study that offers insight into the experience of formerly abused women. It illuminates the "why's" of complex interpersonal relationships. The next important step in building a knowledge and intervention base will be to empirically validate these findings in a national telephone survey of women's risk and protective factors for intimate partner violence. Prevention and early intervention will not only save lives now, but will prevent this "generational curse" from damaging future generations.