Respecting & Listening to Victims of Violence

A handbook for those who are supporting women who have been abused by an intimate partner

Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter

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Introduction

Is someone you know a victim of family violence? Perhaps someone has told you their partner is abusive, but you are not sure how to talk with them about it. It can be very upsetting to know that someone you care about is being abused by their partner. Sometimes it can be hard to know how to help.

This handbook is written mainly for people who want to be able to support victims of family violence. It may also be of interest to victims themselves, and those who have acted abusively toward others.

We would also like to note that in this handbook, we are using the word she to describe the victim and he to describe the perpetrator, because in our women's shelter, most of our clients have been in heterosexual relationships in which they have been abused by men. However, sometimes women within heterosexual relationships can be abusive towards men. Within same sex relationships, one partner can also be abusive towards the other.

We have written this handbook to give you some ideas about talking with victims in ways that we believe will be helpful to women who are being abused by their partner. These ideas have come from therapists who have worked with victims over many years (see acknowledgment section at end of handbook). The intent of this handbook is not to suggest that supporters be therapists. Rather, our hope is that you may get a few ideas to help you respond to victims in respectful ways.

We know from talking with victims that they often tell their stories and reach out for help from many people. Women have told us that if they feel supported and validated by others, they are more likely to continue talking about their partner's abusive behaviour, and to continue seeking help and support.

If they feel blamed, misunderstood, and or judged, they are more likely to keep the truth of what is really going on to themselves. The experience of being blamed and judged by others can be very painful, can make victims feel alone in dealing with the many challenges they face, and can even make them feel like they are being victimized again.

We have found that victims' lives are almost always very complex, and they are facing situations where there are no simple, easy answers. Often all of their choices involve painful, frightening possibilities. For example, a woman may wish to escape the abuse from her partner, but she knows if she leaves, her partner may be able to obtain custody of her children because he has a good job and has a lot more money than she does. Other women, knowing their partner will still have some access to her children if they leave, may wonder if they are better able to protect their children from the abuser by staying with him. Often women are very concerned about leaving their abusive partners because they do not want to raise their children in poverty (which research has shown happens to many women). For others, they feel their partner is more dangerous to them if they leave, so they think about staying with their partner to try to keep themselves and their children safer. (Research also

supports the view of these women, showing that the risk for many women significantly increases if they leave their abusive partner.)

Other women do not wish to leave their partner at all. A man who at times behaves abusively often still has many good qualities. She may still love him, and there may often be long periods of time when he treats her respectfully. The perpetrator may also treat his children well, and so women may feel their children are better off with a family that is together. We have most often found that victims have a great number of challenges to sort through, and it is very important that they feel safe enough to be able to talk to someone who will listen to them, and not judge.

When listening to victims' experiences, we have found it helpful to focus on their responses rather than on the effects of their partner's abusive behaviour. Therefore, we will take a closer look at the differences between responses and effects.

Responses Versus Effects

It was only in the 1970's that the problem of family violence began to be talked about in our society, and that programs were started for victims and perpetrators. To show that the problems of family violence are serious, advocates for victims talked a great deal about how victims are affected by abuse. While it is still really important for everyone to know how dangerous and how very hurtful abuse is to victims, the problem is that looking only at how victims are affected by abuse results in a one-sided and overly negative view of victims. Consequently, there are now many stereotypes of victims. One of these is that they are "damaged." Another stereotype is that victims are somehow to blame for the abuse they have received from their partners. Because onlookers may not pay attention to how victims respond to abuse (which can be subtle), they may assume victims are abused because they do not speak up for themselves, are weak, or are poor at setting boundaries.

In fact, in our experience, all victims, even small children, resist being mistreated. When we look at the way victims always respond to the mistreatment, we realize there is no such thing as a passive victim.

Here are some of the ideas about family violence that we find to be very helpful when working with both victims and perpetrators. These ideas are explained in more detail in our companion handbooks, *Honouring Resistance*, and *Choosing to Change*. We will provide a brief review of these ideas here, provide definitions of some of the words we are using, and then explore some of the ways people can use the beliefs and principles in this handbook to support victims.

Our Beliefs About Family Violence

1 Whenever people are badly treated, they always resist.

In our experience of working with victims of violence, we have found that none of them complied or simply put up with violence, disrespect, or oppression. They always tried to reduce, prevent, or stop the abuse in some way. Because they are often in dangerous situations, victims usually do not resist the perpetrator's abuse openly (although some victims do resist openly anyway). In some cases, the only way victims can resist the abuse is in their thoughts, or through small acts that are sometimes not noticed by others.

For example, if the perpetrator tries to isolate the victim, women often resist by trying to retain some relationships with others, perhaps by imagining or remembering good times with their loved ones. One woman's partner told her she could not speak to a lifelong friend. This woman resisted by talking with her friend when her husband was not present. Another woman's husband monitored her so closely, she felt that she could not contact her friends, but she longed for the laughter and sharing she had with them, so she remembered the good times with them. She said that in order to have some contact with others she also made a point of chatting with the people she met as she went about her day—store clerks, fellow passengers on the bus, or passersby.

2 People tend not to notice that victims resist abuse.

Because victims must be careful how they resist, others may not even notice, and so assume that victims are passive and do not do enough to stand up for themselves.

An example of how victims subtly resist abuse in ways that are easily overlooked was provided by a woman who refused to follow instructions from her controlling partner who insisted she used a ruler to set up the baby gate a precise distance from the edge of the wall. When asked how she responded to his instructions, the woman replied that she simply "eyeballed" where to place the gate. For others, the only safe place to voice their opposition to their partners is in the privacy of their own minds. By staying attentive to these "small acts of living" (Erving Goffman) through which victims resist mistreatment, we can counter the demoralizing idea that the victim passively endured the abuse without fighting back.

3 Perpetrators of violence know that victims will resist, so they make plans to stop the victims from resisting.

Despite the fact that many onlookers, and even victims themselves, fail to recognize how victims resist, the one group of people who do not make this mistake is perpetrators. For instance, some women will resist their partner's abuse by leaving the house. Knowing this, some men will try to stop this resistance by taking shoes, money, bankcards, and car keys. Other men might pull the phone out of the wall or break the woman's cell phone to prevent their wives from calling for help.

4 Violent and abusive behaviour is always done deliberately.

The fact that perpetrators make plans to stop victims from resisting shows that their abuse is deliberate. Perpetrators also make decisions about how they will be abusive. For example, some men will say it is "wrong to hit a woman," but they will push, grab, and verbally abuse their partners.

5 When it comes to domestic violence, appearances are deceiving.

Others cannot easily see what is actually happening in domestic violence situations. Perpetrators and victims do not normally tell others what is going on. Perpetrators cover up their abusive behaviour. They may blame the victim and be friendly and charming to the outside world, so that they do not have to face the consequences of their actions. Victims do not often tell the full story of the abuse to others, because it may not be safe to do so, and they do not want people to think negatively of them.

These ideas lay the foundation for the principles we have found the most useful in supporting victims. We will briefly discuss these principles. Then we will share one woman's story of her husband's abusive behaviour, and her experiences of how various people in her life responded when they found out he was abusive. We will then reflect back on her story as we discuss how the principles might be used by supporters in real life situations.

First, we will define some of the words we use in this handbook. For those wanting to know which behaviours are generally considered to be abusive, please see Appendix 1.

Definitions

Abuse:

Deliberate behaviour in which one person chooses to attempt to dominate, control, or harm another. Perpetrators abuse against the will and over the protests of victims, who never ask or choose to be abused.

Perpetrator:

The person who chooses to behave in ways that harm, control, or dominate another.

Victim:

The person who has been purposely harmed by the unwanted actions of another. The victim is in no way responsible for the abusive actions of another. Victims always oppose abuse and often show great strength in doing so. When we remain mindful that victims always resist, the term 'victim' loses the negative connotations that are sometimes associated with it.

Resistance to Abuse:

Whenever people are badly treated, they do many things to oppose the abuse and to keep their dignity, integrity, and self-respect. This is called resistance. The resistance might include not doing what the perpetrator wants them to do, or standing up against, and trying to stop or prevent violence, disrespect, or oppression. Imagining a better life may also be a way that victims resist abuse.

Five Principles of Supporting Victims Outlined

We believe it is helpful to victims when their supporters keep the following principles in mind. After we outline these principles, we will tell the story of a victim of family violence, and the many responses she received from others to being a victim. We will then refer back to her story as we explore these principles of supporting victims in more detail.

1 Acknowledging the violence.

When the victim is talking about her experiences of abuse, it is important to pay close attention to the violence and abuse she has experienced.

We have found that most victims find it helpful when supporters acknowledge the abuse they are experiencing, and talk about it in clear, matter of fact terms. In our experience, they do not find it helpful when others minimize the abuse, and fail to notice the extent to which their partner is hurting and scaring them.

2 Being clear that the one who perpetrates abuse is the one who is responsible.

Victims are usually clear that the abuse is not their fault, and that their partners are responsible for their abusive behaviour. They find it helpful when they have conversations with supporters who are also clear that it is the person who perpetrated the abuse who is the one responsible.

3 Honouring the victim's resistance to the violence.

Victims always resist being treated badly. Alongside each story of abuse is an equal story of the victim's resistance to the abuse. In our experience, victims have appreciated it when we have asked about and paid attention to all that they have done to resist their partner's abuse, to try to protect themselves and/or their children, or to stand up for their dignity and integrity. It is important to notice resistance even when victims have resisted in quiet ways that others might not have seen. Again, victims' resistance is often subtle because often it is not safe for them to resist directly. In our experience, victims feel disrespected if others assume they have done nothing in the face of abuse.

4 Challenging victim-blaming messages the victim has received from others.

Many victims receive messages from others that suggest it is their fault that their partner is abusive to them. They get the message that they are damaged or sick in some way, or there is something wrong with them because they are with an abusive partner. For example, they may be told that they are not strong enough, or that they picked an abusive partner because "abuse is all they know from an abusive childhood." When we listen carefully to victims and notice their acts of resistance, it becomes clear that victims are not to blame for what happened to them. In this way, we can also help them challenge any victim-blaming messages they may have received.

5 Allowing victims the right to judge their own choices.

While we always seek to challenge victim blaming messages, and work hard to make it clear that the perpetrator always had a better choice than to abuse another person, we have also found that it is helpful to allow victims the space to talk about their regrets if they wish to. Like all of us, victims often feel they have made poor choices, and that they could have done better. We have found that allowing victims the space to judge their own decisions helps them view their situation in a more balanced and objective way, to explore the dilemmas and difficulties they face, and explore the options that seem the most reasonable to them given their partner's abusive behaviour and their personal situations.

As mentioned, we will now look at a victim's story. We will look at some of the abuse Raina experienced from her partner, and at how various people in her life, including helping professionals, responded when they found out that her husband Joe was abusing Raina.

Raina, as well as the other women we mention in the handbook, have given us permission to share their stories in this handbook. Names and identifying information have been changed, but the quotations are Raina's actual words.

Raina's Story

Raina was married to her partner Joe for 15 years, and had three children with him, before he was ever physically abusive to her. She said they had fights like every other normal couple, and Raina never suspected that one day Joe would choose to physically abuse her. She said:

"If there were signs that you would think somebody was going to do things that would be harmful to yourself, to others around you, or to your children, those red flags were not there. They literally were not there."

Raina and Joe had just moved from a farm to a metropolitan area in Canada, when Joe began to be very verbally abusive to her. Raina had not yet had a chance to make a lot of friends—other than one friend who had invited Raina to go to the gym with her a few times a week. Raina said that after she started going to the gym, Joe began coming home from work ready to rant and rave at her, accusing her of cheating on him with men at the gym. In fact, Raina had never been unfaithful to Joe; her marriage vows were something she took very seriously. Joe would go on what she described as "verbal rampages", in which he would call her "every name in the book", would tell her she had "wasted his life," and that he wanted her "out of his life". Raina explained that she often responded to these verbal attacks by remaining quiet, because this tended to keep her and her children safer.

She also responded by reaching out for help for her marriage and for her husband's abusive behaviour. She began by calling a crisis line. She said, however, that she "got such an angry response on the phone as to why I was living in that situation, that it completely turned me off from ever calling that agency again." She also called the police service, asking them if they could assist her in dealing with her husband's verbal abuse of her. She said the police explained to her that she had options with respect to leaving her husband, but that they would not be able to press charges against Joe unless he was threatening to kill her or unless the abuse escalated to physical abuse.

Raina continued to reach out for more help for Joe and for her marriage. She said she called another crisis line, and was given advice to "make a police report," to "make an emergency stash for yourself," and "to get out of the house right now." Raina said this was not very helpful because she felt that someone else was assuming they knew what was best for her, and were telling her to do things she had, in fact, already tried (such as calling the police). She said they did not take the time to listen to her.

Raina recalled the shock she experienced when, on one particular night in the 15th year of their marriage, Joe came home drunk and was physically abusive for the first time.

Raina recalled the shock she experienced when, on one particular night in the 15th year of their marriage, Joe came home drunk and was physically abusive for the first time. He started one of his verbal rampages again. He hurled insults at her, verbally berated her, and told her he could not stand seeing her face. However, this time Joe also grabbed Raina and threw her out of the house on a cold winter's night, and locked the door so she could not get back in. Raina said she was without her coat, shoes, or purse—but, she had her cell phone in her pocket. Raina says that she had tucked her cell phone in her pocket when Joe had started his verbal tirade, because he was frightening her, and wanted it with her in case she needed help. She ran through the snow to the corner store so she could, within the warmth of the store, call her only friend to come and pick her up. The following day Joe phoned her to apologize, and promised her he would never touch her again. He swore it was the alcohol that had made him so "crazy" and said he would quit drinking. He also told her he had already called AA for help.

Raina decided to return to Joe, although she felt doubtful that he would change since he had made similar promises in the past. In addition, her marriage vows were important to her, and she felt it was better for the children if they could be raised in a two-parent family. She also continued to try to get help, as it really scared her that Joe had grabbed her and thrown her around.

Raina persuaded Joe to go to a marriage counsellor. She said that the counsellor told her she was at least 30% of the problem because she was remaining quiet rather than expressing herself. Raina said the counsellor "told me I had to get out of my shell, I had to speak up for myself… if I didn't like something, if I didn't like the way Joe was talking to me, if we were having a fight about something, I couldn't just let him rant and rave at me. I had to speak up… to be vocal about it." Raina said she took the advice of the counsellor seriously, trusting in his professional expertise, and decided to give his suggestions a try. She thought, "maybe I should step up and take ownership of these events, how I'm feeling, and really express that to him, and come across strong. It's okay to yell, it's okay to get these feelings off your chest. And in some of the arguments when I'd been doing that—that's exactly when the violence escalated." Raina stated further that when she had tried "coming up to Joe and being assertive, [it] had exactly the opposite effect. He would become aggressive, and he would try to completely overwhelm and win the argument in any way that he could. So me standing in front of him and giving him a little shout down did not help. Objects got broken, things went flying."

Raina stated further that that when she had tried "coming up to Joe and being assertive, [it] had exactly the opposite effect…

Despite these dangerous consequences of her assertiveness, Raina said the counsellor then told her, "It's okay, this is good, you're getting somewhere. If you're not communicating at all, you're not getting anywhere". In fact, Raina's experience of being highly assertive towards Joe was that it made things much worse: "it was worse to the point where I can't even explain to you how bad that was… his behaviour escalated, it was way more dangerous, it wasn't safe to talk at all. It wasn't safe at times to even be around him physically." Raina said that the incident when Joe threw her out of her own house was only the first of many frightening episodes in which Joe

was physically abusive to her. She said his abusive behaviour escalated to the point where both she and her children were walking on eggshells around their house, never knowing when Joe would suddenly become violent to Raina. In describing the fear she felt of Joe, Raina said "I never got a chance to relax. The tension got so bad because he would come home at unpredictable times." Every time Raina went to the gym with her friend, Joe continued to rant and rave and accuse her of infidelity with men at the gym, behaviour which was even more frightening now that Joe had shown he was willing to physically hurt Raina.

Nevertheless, Raina remained determined to try to do what she could to make things better in her family. Raina said she confided in the one good friend she had made in the city, hoping her friend might have some ideas of resources to help her and her family. Raina said she told her friend that she felt that if she continued going to the gym with her, "things were going to get really, really bad. I was even showing her the broken dishes, the smashed cell phones, and the holes in the wall." Her friend responded to Raina by saying, "you're just letting him do this to you… you're letting him control you. Look how scared you are. How can you let yourself be pushed around by somebody like that?" Raina said she told her friend, "I don't feel safe here anymore—it's getting absolutely beyond the point of damage control… I don't know how long I can even stay at my own house anymore." Her friend's response was to tell her that, "whatever the fight is about, you've got to forgive him, you've got to learn to let those things go, don't hold onto them… tomorrow's another day, and it's going to be fine." Raina said her reaction to her friend's advice was that she felt like her friend did not understand her at all, and she decided to completely stop talking to her friend about her situation.

Shortly after Raina stopped talking to her friend, Joe severely sprained her ankle." When Raina sought medical help for her ankle, she told them that her injury was a result of her husband pushing her onto the floor. Shortly thereafter, Children's Services came to her house to interview her. She said the interviewer said to her, "Let me know what you did to deserve it. Were you egging him on, were

you trying to add fuel to the fire?" Raina said then the interviewer got into a personal line of questioning, asking: "What room was I in the house when this argument occurred? Was I dressed? Was I not dressed? Were we intimate at the time? What had initially happened to make him angry or aggravated?" Raina also said that several times the interviewer said to her, "Don't lie to me, because if you lie to me I'm going to find out about it."

Raina said she felt outraged by the way the Children's Services worker had treated her. She called the worker's supervisor and requested a different worker, saying to the supervisor that in her opinion,

"If you're here to work with families, and you're here to safeguard them when they're having troubles, or be a resource for us to turn to when things are bad, like you say you are, then I feel I need to have a relationship with somebody where I feel like I can actually talk to them—not where I'm going to get penalized or blamed for what actually happened."

Raina said the supervisor was very responsive to her concerns, and assigned her a different worker with whom Raina was more comfortable.

Raina commented that after having Children's Services involved in her life, "this was the first taste I got in, okay, why haven't I prevented the violence from affecting my children? Why did I allow the verbal violence to continue, to the point where it affected my household, it affected my children, and now to the point where I had gotten hurt myself?" Raina said the Children's Services worker was acting as though Joe's abuse was something she could control and should know how to stop. She realized at that point that if she reached out for more help "I'm going to have Children's Services and workers like this involved with my life. That's going to be part and parcel of what I'm going to have to contend with. I didn't want to deal with that… it really put me off getting help actually at that point. It really did stop me from stepping forward."

Raina said that, unfortunately, her husband 's abusive behaviour continued to escalate. She said:

"How he was treating me was getting really, really horrible. I was afraid to put on makeup at this point, to even go to work, because I was looking good for someone at work but not for him at home... Things that he was saying were completely out of line and uncalled for. I told him that, and his response was, 'If you don't like it, leave. Get lost, get out of here'."

In fact, at this point in her marriage, Raina did start to make plans to leave. However, one of the barriers to leaving was that the family had a little dog that Raina felt was very much part of their family. Raina did not feel that Joe would take proper care of the pet, as she had always been the one to do so, and she worried the dog would be neglected. Again, she reached out for help, and she said that everyone she talked to advised her just to leave the pet behind—that she should put her own needs and her children's needs ahead of her pet. For Raina, though, her pet was very much a part of her family. Raina again felt that people were not listening to her, so she simply chose not to talk about this with others. She ended up asking her brother if he could look after her dog—he agreed to do so should she decide to leave Joe.

Raina said shortly after the conversation with her brother, Joe once again injured her. He dislocated her elbow and she ended up with an arm sling. She felt, "this time I need to leave, no matter what." However, with her ankle still injured, and now her arm in a sling, she knew it would be difficult to leave on her own with three children. She asked her friend to help her. Her friend agreed, but said she needed a week's notice as she was particularly busy that week. The friend said she would take Raina and her children to a women's shelter the following week. Raina said she felt this would be okay, as Joe seemed to have settled down again, so that week she quietly focused on getting prepared to leave her home and her marriage.

Unfortunately, during this week, Joe started a "fight about nothing", and physically attacked her again, this time threatening to kill her. Raina reached out for help again, calling a crisis line. She said, "I started asking them a lot of questions about what happens in someone's mind when they start talking to you like this… Can you tell if someone is intent on doing what they say?" Raina said the call got reported to Children's Services, and that evening the worker told Raina to leave the house immediately, which she did. Raina said her response to being told to leave immediately was "in some ways it was okay" because she had never thought Joe would actually threaten to kill her and the fact that he had left her questioning what he was capable of. Thus, she said she agreed with their assessment that she and the children might be safer by leaving immediately. "On the other hand I felt like they just sort of ignored the fact that I was taking all the steps that I needed to take at that point, and I was doing the right things." She said Children's Services ignored that she had arranged to go to a women's shelter before they intervened.

Raina said that she felt overwhelmed when she went to the shelter, as the length of time she had to make plans was so short—21 days. She said she was "in a panic the next two days after I came to the shelter, because that's when they started pouring it on that this was temporary, and you had to leave." They began asking her about her long term plans, continually questioning, "'What are you going to do?'... The welcome was very short. It was, 'You'd better start calling other shelters to find a place to go.'"

Raina said she had both helpful and unhelpful responses from counsellors in the shelter where she was. She said there was a counsellor who "did seem to have a real sense of caring and understanding." Raina really appreciated that she had "compassion towards me." On the other hand, she said she also got a mixture of "non-help and condemnation" from others. For example, she spoke with another counsellor who said to her, "I just don't understand, why didn't you do something to prevent the violence from getting worse? Like, you know, if it was already disturbing your children and your home, and you'd already had your ankle sprained, how much worse did it have to get for you to leave? I don't understand that."

Raina was clear that she was not responsible for Joe's abuse—she said that she felt she had tried to be "as proactive as I possibly could be, in terms of resources, in terms of counseling, in terms of talking with him, in terms of communicating with my family... I was trying to look at every option I possibly had." She went on to explain that "the other part was I did not understand how I was supposed to know that the violence was going to get worse… both of those things implied I had control over his behaviour. I never had any control over his behaviour."

"This is not mental stress. I feel good about what I did. I got away…"

While Raina was in the women's shelter, at one point she became very ill with what later turned out to be a serious infection. She was experiencing insomnia, cramping, vomiting, and diarrhea. She said she went to the doctor's office feeling very ill and in significant pain. Yet, when the doctor learned she was currently in a women's shelter she was told that her symptoms were simply due to stress. She returned to the doctor's office several times because she was getting worse, and feeling increasingly fatigued and weak. On one of her visits, Raina said she was given painkillers, sleeping pills, as well as the advice to listen to relaxation tapes, and to talk to a counsellor about her abuse history. Raina stated, "I just felt at that point that nobody was going to listen to me. Everybody was trying to look after my mental health, and I'd kind of got to the point where you know—I'm moving forward with what I'm trying to do, and I'm telling you that this is not a mental problem that I'm having. This is not mental stress. I feel good about what I did. I got away… don't worry about my mental health, I'll take care of that myself."

Raina said she knew her problem was her physical health. But when she again tried to voice her concerns, the doctor looked exasperated, telling her that if she were not so overweight, she would not have insomnia, vomiting or diarrhea. The issue, the doctor said, was that

Raina did not eat properly, and had no concept of portion control. Raina said that she left the office feeling attacked and horrible about herself. Yet, Raina said that she was also convinced that physically something was very wrong. So she continued to search for medical answers. Raina finally found a doctor who listened to her symptoms, said he could see she was very ill, and ran tests. When the results came in, he said she had an infection that was so severe, she was in a life-threatening situation, and that she needed to go immediately to hospital to begin intravenous antibiotics. When she tried telling the doctor that she needed time to arrange childcare, he told her she had better get that arranged in the next hour because her health was so compromised. With the proper diagnosis and treatment, Raina said she immediately began to feel better and eventually fully recovered.

After an extended stay in the women's shelter system, Raina finally moved to her own independent housing in the community with her three children.

Raina's story helps us to see that how others respond to victims can is very important. Raina repeatedly reached out to others to seek out help with her marriage and her husband's abusive behaviour—despite receiving some very negative, blaming, and disrespectful messages from others. Using examples from Raina's story, we will now review the five principles of supporting victims of family violence. We will also use examples from other clients we have worked with over the years.

Five Principles Explored in More Detail

1 When the victim is talking about her experiences of abuse, it is important to acknowledge the reality of the violence and abuse she has experienced.

Unfortunately, Raina had some responses from others which ignored the fact that she was living with a violent partner who terrified her.

For example, when Raina reached out for help from her friend, she tried to communicate to her friend how dangerous Joe was by showing her where he had punched holes in the walls. Instead of acknowledging how violent her husband had been, her friend suggested she should just "forgive and forget", let things go, and be positive. Raina felt that her friend did not understand at all what it was like for her to constantly walk on eggshells, knowing at any moment of the day her partner could come home and terrorize her. Her friend's advice was so unhelpful that Raina decided never to talk with her again about her husband's abuse.

Raina also was told by a marriage counsellor that she should be very assertive with Joe, that by being quiet she was part of the problem in her marriage. Again, this advice ignored the fact that Joe was violent, abusive, and dangerous. Because Raina was wanting to try everything she could to stop the abuse and to protect herself and her children, she took the counsellor's advice seriously. It turned out that the advice of the counsellor put Raina into more danger, since Joe's violence escalated significantly when Raina tried being assertive.

Regrettably, this type of response from counsellors is not unusual. Another woman, Susan, had left her partner because of his abusive behaviour. However, he was promising to change, and seemed so sincere, that Susan went to a counsellor to review her decision. This counsellor told Susan that if she were more assertive, her partner would "love her for it." Susan, like Raina, took the counsellor's advice seriously and decided to try again with her partner. Like Joe, Susan's partner also escalated his violence significantly when Susan tried speaking out.

In contrast, Raina commented on how helpful a counsellor at the women's shelter had been when she had been caring, understanding, and compassionate towards her. We often have compassionate emotional responses when we encounter someone who is being victimized. Expression of empathy and care, therefore, is one way that supporters can communicate to a victim that they are paying close attention to the extent to which she is being unilaterally hurt and violated by her partner.

Women have frequently told us how much they appreciate it when supporters simply ask them about their partner's abusive behaviour, and listen carefully when the women talk about it. Understanding the victim's safety concerns for herself and/or her children is another way the supporter can show s/he understands that the victims are in danger from the perpetrator. In our experience, victims are not afraid of direct questions about the violence they have experienced, and in fact often appreciate being able to have an honest discussion about what has happened. We have found that questions such as the following can be helpful to let victims know you are prepared to listen to what they have to say:

? Is it OK if I ask you some questions about what happened to you?

? How bad does it get? What is the worst time you can remember?

? What can I do to help?

Further, part of the dilemma for many women is that while their partners are abusive, there are also times that their partner is respectful, supportive, and caring. There may be parts of him that she truly loves and would grieve if she were to leave. She may need to talk about the pulls she feels in this respect, and the challenges she feels in sorting this through. Sometimes, it is difficult for supporters to listen to stories about the partner's good qualities because they are angry about his abusive behaviour and would like the answer to be simple. In Canadian society, there is a strong belief that women with abusive partners should leave the relationship. We tend to present perpetrators as cardboard cut-out "bad guys" who have no redeeming qualities.

Additionally, if we focus on our desire for a simple solution, we tend to ignore the very real risks of poverty and homelessness should a woman leave. Women may be concerned about how they will be able to protect their children if they are not living in the family home. Custody and access issues are often challenging. Women who do not have permanent residency run the risk of being deported. Thus, there are many challenges and concerns facing women who are thinking about leaving an abusive partner.

Remember to only ask what you will be comfortable hearing about. If you feel you are out of your depth, simply support the victim by telling her you care about her and will help her find a safe place to talk.

2 Being clear that the one who perpetrates abuse is the one who is responsible.

Even though Raina was clear that she was not to blame for her husband's abuse of her, she received numerous upsetting messages from others that they thought she was responsible for his behaviour. She had an investigator from Children's Services ask her what she did to "egg him on", and why her husband had been so upset—implying that perhaps Raina did something that made her deserve the abuse. She had a marriage counsellor tell her she was 30% of the problem, and she had other counsellors suggest she should have known Joe would escalate his violence. Raina said she received many messages that it was her responsibility that Joe's violence was affecting her and her children. These people made it seem that Joe was not accountable or responsible for his behaviour, but Raina was.

In our experience, the only person that can control the perpetrator's abusive behaviour is the perpetrator. He is the one who can determine if he's going to become increasingly controlling, aggressive and dangerous, or if he will respond more respectfully. Women have told us how helpful it can be when supporters are clear that it is the perpetrator who is the one making decisions to inflict harm on her or other members of the family, and that the victim is not in any way responsible for these decisions. We have also found that making it clear that the perpetrator had a choice to act differently can also make a difference.

Below is an example of how a supporter talked with Vickie about an abusive incident with her partner Rick.

Vickie: *Rick and I were supposed to attend a formal party with all the upper management in his company. It was very important to him that this go well because he was being considered for a major promotion. For weeks, he was giving me tips on how I should dress, how I should wear my hair, do my make-up. And the more he talked at me, the more nervous I got and the more I doubted myself. On the day of the party, when I was walking home from work I saw an evening bag in a shop window that would be perfect with my dress—it was also on sale, $20.00. I was so proud of this find and I thought Rick would be thrilled. It would complete the look he wanted. But when I got home and showed it to him he went ballistic; screaming at me that I was stupid and selfish for spending that money. Never mind that he spends more than that on coffee in a week. He was standing so close to me and screaming so hard that flecks of spit were actually hitting my face.*

Supporter: *That must have been awful for you.*

Vickie: *Oh it was. I was terrified, actually terrified. And you know, it got even worse because right in the middle of that, the doorbell rings, and he just stopped. Mid-word. Silence. He just turned from me, quietly told me to clean up my face, and went to the door. I could hear him laughing and joking with his friends—they were coming to pick us up for the party.*

Supporter: *Geez, so he just stopped screaming, just like that.*

Vickie: *Just like that. I was so amazed. He just turned off the whole rampage, and was laughing and joking with them.*

Supporter: *What do you think about him being able to just turn it off like that?*

Vickie: *It just made it really clear to me that he can actually control himself. You know, everyone we know thinks he's such a nice guy, so he didn't want them to know that he can "lose it".*

Supporter: *Has he ever done anything like that before?*

Vickie: *Oh, yeah. He's done it time and time again. He knows I hate it when he goes into those verbal attacks, so he'll often threaten to become "upset"—his code word for abuse, if I don't do what he wants.*

Supporter: *So he uses the threat of being abusive to try and control you?*

Vickie: *It's just made me think, if Rick can plan in advance to be abusive, he must be able to turn on his rage when he wants to try to get control over me. It's still quite shocking to think his anger isn't an impulse.*

3 Honouring the victim's resistance to the violence.

Raina received many messages from others that implied she passively accepted the violence and abuse from her husband. For example, a friend questioned why Raina was "letting her husband control her" and why she was "letting him push her around." Raina said she received many messages that implied she did "nothing" to try to prevent the violence from affecting her and her children, and others questioned why she did not leave as soon as the abuse began. In fact, Raina did lots of things to oppose her husband's abuse. She tried talking to her husband about her concerns, tried telling him to stop his abuse very assertively, attempted to get help for her relationship, and was in the process of making plans to leave when her husband threatened her life. She also talked about how unsafe it was

for her to directly challenge Joe. When the Children's Services worker intervened and told Raina to leave immediately —while Raina understood why the worker insisted she leave right away—she was upset that the worker assumed she had done nothing to try to protect herself and her children.

Other women have told us they have found it helpful when others pay attention to what women have done to try to keep themselves and their children safe. We often find it helpful to ask, "What did you do?", or, "How did you respond?" when women talk about examples of how they have been mistreated.

4 Challenging victim-blaming messages the victim has received from others.

Often victims of family violence encounter a multitude of victim-blaming messages that suggest they are somehow sick or damaged. For example, Raina was told by health care professionals that her physical health problems were all caused by stress. She was told to listen to relaxation tapes and to call a counsellor, when in fact she had a life-threatening infection. The message she received repeatedly was that there was something wrong with her because she was a victim. When she reached out for help from a crisis line, she received an angry response from a counsellor who blamed her for living with an abusive partner—in other words, that it was her fault that she was being abused. She also received advice from others who assumed they knew what was best for her.

For example, she was told she should not be concerned about her family pet—that she should just leave her house immediately. The no-win message that Raina received was that because she was a victim, she did not know what was best for herself, and because she did not know what was best for herself, she was a victim. There was simply no way for

Raina to gain the respect she deserved from others for the steps she was taking to improve her life.

Victims have told us they find it helpful when others listen carefully when they talk about the challenges they are facing, and understand that there are often no quick and easy solutions to their problems. They have told us they appreciate it when others talk with them in ways that respect that they are trying to do the best they can. Victims have told us they feel supported when others recognize how hurtful it is to be blamed for someone else's actions.

When talking to victims, we have found they appreciate it if we help them challenge blaming messages. For example, we might have the following conversation with someone who felt blamed for the abuse they experienced:

Supporter: *How did you feel when your (sister, friend, counsellor, minister, etc.) said, "I wouldn't let anyone treat me like that"?*

Client: *Terrible. I felt like it was somehow my fault even though I know I can't control another person's choices.*

Supporter: *How do you know his choices weren't your fault?*

Client: *Because I know all the things I did to try and tell him how I felt and make things better. Besides, I can't control what someone else does.*

Supporter: *How would it feel if your (sister, friend, etc.) chose to talk about the things you did to try and make it better?*

Client: *Fantastic—then I would feel like I did everything I possibly could and it would be so much easier to move forward now.*

5 Give the victim room to talk about her own regrets and bad choices.

Although it is important not to blame victims for other people's choices, we have found it is also important to give them space to talk about regrets about their own choices. Research has shown that victims who acknowledge negative emotions and events, but don't dwell on them, often are able to recover faster. We have found that victims often want to discuss what they feel they did wrong, and what they would do differently next time or do differently if they could do the past over. We have found that making room to talk about these topics and how the victim might apply what they have learned can be helpful. For example, with a victim who regrets giving her partner a second chance only for him to become violent again, we might have the following discussion:

Client: I don't know why I even married him. Before we even got engaged, I knew he was an alcoholic.

Supporter: Do you remember what you did when you found out he was an alcoholic?

Client: I told him I wasn't prepared to tolerate his drinking and he would have to stop before I would marry him.

Supporter: What did he do?

Client: Well, he did stop for two years, until after we got married. But I thought that would take care of all our problems–and he was better–but he was still self-centered and verbally abusive sometimes.

Supporter: Wow, it's easy to see how him staying sober for two years would look like an important step forward to you. What did you learn from the fact that it still didn't end all the abuse?

Client: I know now that it's how the person treats others that counts. Alcohol can be part of the problem, but sober people can be mean too.

Supporter: How could that knowledge be helpful to you?

Client: It helps me to know I have learned something from what I've been through. It helps me feel like it wasn't a totally lost part of my life.

Note that the questions suggested in the above examples are just meant to give you ideas on things you could talk about with a victim you know. There is no need to ask or suggest anything you don't feel comfortable in talking about. Just being there for her in a safe and nonjudgmental way is often more helpful than words could ever be.

Emotional Responses of Supporters

When someone you care about is being abused by their intimate partner, and you are trying to support them, it can also be difficult for you. It makes sense that the pain of her victimization and the dilemmas she is struggling with could also raise emotional issues for you. For example, she may be acting or responding in ways that are difficult for you to understand, or could even be against your values. You might have ideas on what you'd like her to do, but she's not doing those things. There might be times when it is hard for you to be kind, compassionate and nonjudgmental.

Given the complexities and dilemmas associated with abuse, some supporters find it helpful to reflect on their own views and values, as well as the concerns or dilemmas that might arise for them. For these people, personal reflection may help them sort out their own feelings, which in turn helps them maintain their focus when they are listening to the victim discuss her experiences and concerns. Some supporters even choose to have their own support person to help them process what their loved one is experiencing, and their reactions to her circumstances.

If this kind of personal reflection sounds like something that could be useful to you, below is a list of questions that might be helpful in exploring your values, assumptions and beliefs.

- What beliefs/values/assumptions do you have about family violence that you think might help you support victims of violence?
- Are there any beliefs/values/assumptions you hold about those who are victimized that might get in the way of you supporting them?
- How could you change these to make yourself more helpful to victims?
- If you know someone who is being abused, has your view of that person changed? If so, how?
- How do you make sense of this change? Are you OK with it? How would you change your view if you could?
- How does she want you to treat her or act around her now that you know she's being abused?
- Can you act in the way she wishes?
- What are your feelings toward her partner now that you know he is abusive?
- Does this change your opinion of him?
- Will this change how you treat him or act around him?
- How does she want you to treat him? Can you act in the way she wishes?
- What do you think of the concerns/dilemmas she's raising?
- What if she's making decisions that you don't agree with? Can you still support her?
- What if her choices are against your personal values? Can you still support her? How will you do that?

Supporting Victims: A Summary

The role that supportive people can play in helping victims of domestic violence is huge. Studies have shown that positive social responses help victims recover faster, gain trust in asking for help, reduce self-blame, and help the victim feel integrated again into their community. In this booklet, we have outlined five principles to keep in mind when helping victims, including acknowledging the violence the victim has experienced, being clear that the person who chose to act violently is completely responsible for the violence, honouring the victim's resistance, challenging victim-blaming messages, and giving the victim room to talk about regrets about her own choices if she wishes. We have also provided examples of questions we have found useful in talking to victims.

Finally, we wish to emphasize that there is no one way to help victims, and there is no special technique or approach that will always work for sure. Simple human kindness goes much further than technique or experience, and just as cruel or unkind acts can stick with us for a lifetime, simple acts of kindness and compassion can do likewise. We encourage you to do your best to reach out to those who have turned to you for support due to their partners' abusive behaviour.

Appendix 1

Types of abuse by perpetrators
Here are just a few examples of behaviours that are abusive:

Emotional or psychological abuse
- Name calling, belittling, constant criticism
- Screaming at her
- Mocking her
- Putting down her family and friends
- Threatening her about the children (e.g. telling her she will lose custody, saying he will leave town with the children)
- Demanding household chores such as dinner, housework, laundry etc. are done in the way he wants
- Abusing or neglecting children and not allowing her to intervene
- Not speaking to her for days at a time
- Using her lack of legal rights to control her (threatening to get her deported if she's an immigrant; threatening to kick her out of the house with nothing if common-law)
- Ending a discussion and then making decisions without her
- Telling her she is a bad mother
- Stalking (harassing, following her around town, showing up where he knows she will be, watching her at home through windows)

Isolation
- Trying to stop her from having access to family and/or friends
- Using jealousy to justify questioning and controlling her movements
- Listening to her phone calls, monitoring the mileage on the car, calling her repeatedly
- Trying to make her account for every minute of her day
- Putting her down in front of others
- Trying to keep her from doing things (going out with friends and family, going to work/school)
- Limiting her access to a car or other transportation

Intimidation
- Destroying property
- Giving her angry looks
- Making her do something humiliating or degrading (e.g. begging for forgiveness, having to ask permission to use the car or go out)
- Saying things to scare her (e.g. tell her something bad will happen, threatening to commit suicide, threatening to hurt children, pets, friends, family or anyone that helps her.)
- Bossing her around, telling her to say or not say things

Economic Abuse
- Keeping money from the family
- Trying to stop her from making money
- Trying to make her hand over money
- Trying to make her account for how she spends money
- Forcing the family to live in poverty when money is available

Physical Abuse
- Slapping, hitting, kicking, biting or punching her
- Pushing, grabbing, throwing or shoving her
- Driving recklessly with her in the car
- Causing bruises, cuts, broken bones, etc.
- Throwing, hitting, kicking, burning or smashing objects
- Threatening to become physically abusive towards her or those she loves
- Hurting others she loves (e.g. children, pets, friends or family)
- Preventing her from leaving a room
- Threatening her with a knife, gun or other weapon/object
- Trying to strangle her
- Using a knife, gun or other weapon
- Locking her in or out of the home
- Abandoning her in an unsafe place
- Attempting to kill her or murder

Sexual Abuse

- Emotionally pressuring her to have sex when she doesn't want to
- Physically forcing her to have sex
- Emotionally pressuring her or forcing her to have sex with other people, animals, objects
- Threatening to "out" her if gay or bisexual
- Demanding she wear more (or less) provocative clothing
- Denying her sexuality
- Making degrading sexual comments
- Making threats if she doesn't comply with sex
- Forcing her to have sex for money or to participate in pornography
- Having sex with her when she is asleep

Cultural, Spiritual Abuse

- Attacking or ridiculing her belief system and/or culture
- Attempting to stop her from practicing or participating in spiritual practices
- Attempting to use spirituality or religion as a means of controlling her
- Destroying spiritual objects or scriptures
- Attempting to force her to accept spiritual beliefs or engage in spiritual practices

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This handbook was written by current and former staff of the Men's Counselling Service at the Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter:

Gillian Weaver-Dunlop, M.S.W., R.S.W.

Nick Todd, M.Ed., R. Psych.

Cindy Ogden, M.S.W., R.S.W.

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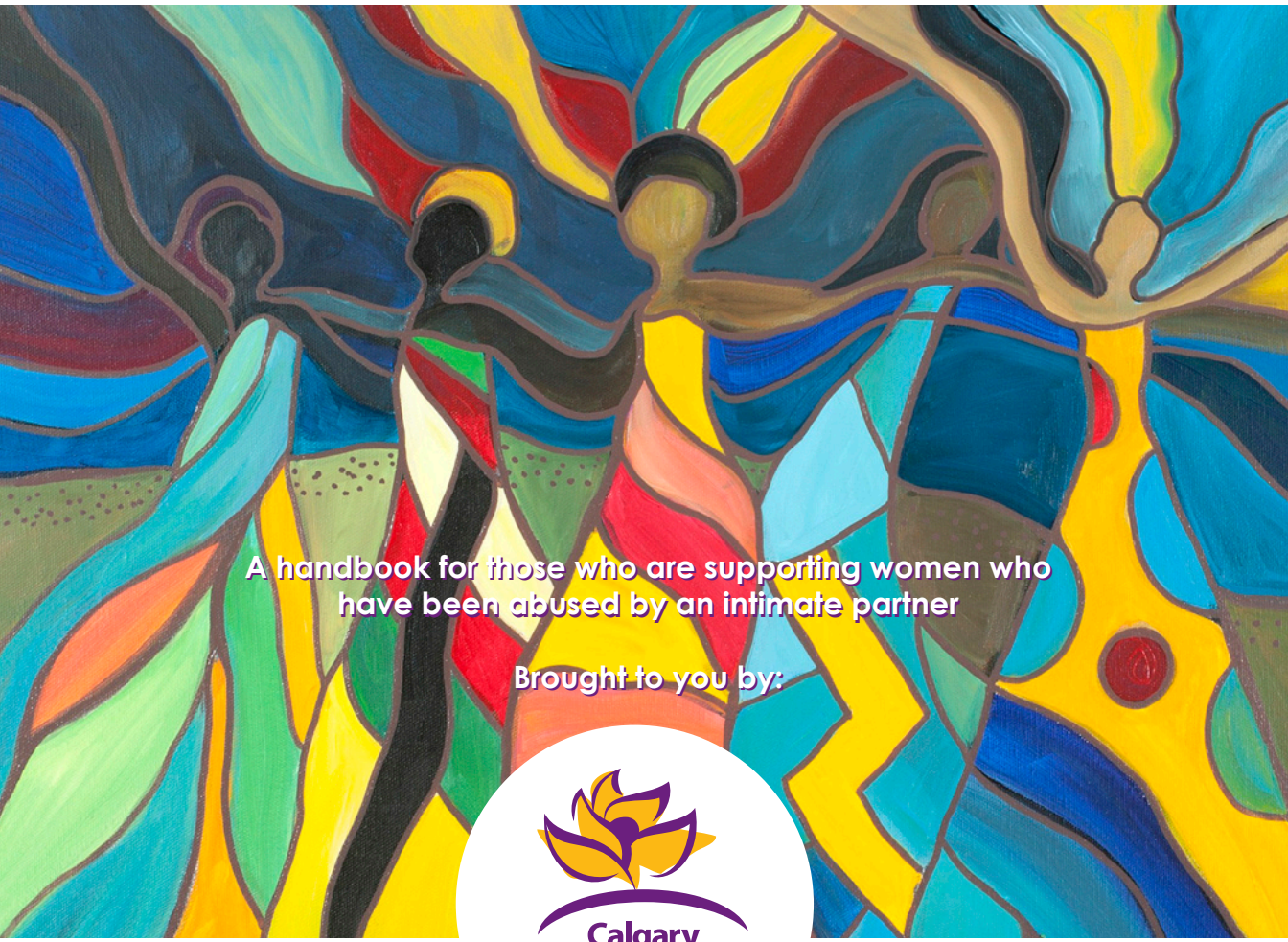
24 Hour Family Violence Helpline
403-234-SAFE (7233)

info@cwes.ca
www.CalgaryWomensShelter.com



A handbook for those who are supporting women who have been abused by an intimate partner

Brought to you by:

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