

Family Shelter Service

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*** SIGNS OF HEALING: FROM VICTIMS TO SURVIVORS ***

By Rebecca Edmonds

Victims of domestic violence face three challenges in healing from abuse. The first is finding some resolution to the end of the relationship. The second is addressing the after effects of the abuse they experienced. The third is maintaining some form of safety planning dependent on the degree of danger still present. Beginning these tasks moves victims of domestic violence on their way to survivorship.

There are obstacles to healing. One of them can be the reaction of other people in the victim's life; the other is the amount of abuse or stalking still present. Victims of abuse are frequently told by helpful others to "get over it," to "let it go," to "forgive," or to "put the past behind them," and so on. These messages give victims the impression that grief for the lost relationship is only allowed for a short time, or that something was wrong with them for being abused in the first place, or, paradoxically, it wasn't as bad as the victim says it was. Discomfort with emotions and lack of knowledge about domestic violence only contribute to the isolation the victim feels at this time, and impedes the healing process.

Regarding the second obstacle, healing from violence is difficult if the victim is still in the abusive relationship; the person must continually be self-focused despite the obstacles the abuser may put in her/his way. Healing is also difficult if stalking is occurring or if there is continued contact with the abuser. Healing presents its difficulties even when the abuser is out of the picture. What these three situations share in common is that the victim must continue with some form of a safety plan until the abuser no longer has access to the victim, the abuser stops contacting the - victim, or until the abuser is dead. It is important to remember that ending a violent relationship is not like ending any other relationship in that victims are at elevated risk of being killed by the abuser.

Given all the above considerations, once they are out of the relationship, victims report feeling several emotions at once, emotions that could be expected after ending any relationship, but are intensified by the after effects of abuse. One survivor said that she felt "lost," as if she had too much time on her hands. She didn't miss the control, of course, but was feeling the effects of so much conditioning. The other emotions reported are: great relief, grief and loss, happiness, sadness, loneliness, freedom, exhilaration, gratefulness that they survived, emptiness, self-doubt (wondering if they did the right thing in leaving, if the abuse was as bad as they remembered), feeling awkward with others, wanting to hide, and a whole host of feelings that seem contradictory. Victims have reported "mood swings" as they experience these emotions simultaneously or within the course of a day.

Symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder may also be present. Victims report dreams or nightmares about the relationship or abuse, feeling numb, changes in eating or sleeping patterns, isolation, rage, inability to trust others, paranoia, hyper-vigilance, and fear. Support from others, attending domestic violence support groups, and examination of the relationship are helpful in addressing all these effects.

Another stage is a sudden explosion of emotions and awareness, a return of memory about the abuse or relationship, growing awareness of the presence of domestic violence at large (which may increase the fear and paranoia), positive physical changes reflecting a new identity (changes in weight, manner of dress, hairstyle), a decrease in PTSD symptoms, and a change of perspective about self and the ex-partner. While all these changes feel like crisis in themselves, it is important for victims and those who support them to realize that healing involves exactly that: the creation of a new self, from which comes liberation.