

Family Shelter Service

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☒ **LEARNED HELPLESSNESS VS SURVIVOR HYPOTHESIS** ☒

Adapted from Battered Women as Survivors by Edward W. Gondolf

| Learned Helplessness Theory | Survivor Hypothesis Theory |
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| Severe abuse fosters as sense of helplessness in the victim. Abuse as a child and the neglect of help sources intensifies this helplessness. The victim of domestic violence is consequently severely victimized. | Severe abuse prompts innovative coping strategies from victims of domestic violence and efforts to seek help. Previous abuse and neglect by help sources lead victims to try other help sources and strategies to lessen the abuse. The victim of domestic violence, in this light, is a survivor. |
| The victim experiences low self-esteem, self-blame, guilt and depression. The only way to feel some sense of control over what is otherwise an unpredictable environment is to think the "If / change my ways, things will get better." But the abuse continues. | The survivor may experience anxiety or uncertainty over the prospects of leaving the batterer. The lack of options, know-how and finances raise fears about trying to escape the batterer. The survivor may therefore attempt to change the batterer instead of attempting to leave. |
| The victim eventually becomes psychologically paralyzed. They fail to seek help and may even appear passive before beatings. When the victim does contact a help source, they are very tentative about receiving help and are likely to return to the batterer despite advice or opportunity to leave. | The survivor actively seeks help from a variety of informal and formal help sources. There is most often inadequate or piecemeal help that leaves the woman little alternative but to return to the batterer. The helpseeking continues, however. |
| The vulnerability and indecisiveness prolongs the violence and may contribute to its intensification. Some observers argue that this tendency may reflect an underlying masochism in the victim of domestic violence. The victim may feel that they deserve to be beaten and accepts it as a fulfillment of their expectations. | The failure of help sources to intervene in a comprehensive and decisive fashion allows abuse to continue and escalate. The inadequacy of help sources may be attributed to a kind of learned helplessness experienced in many community services. Service providers feel too overwhelmed and limited in their resources to be effective and therefore do not try as hard as they might to assist the survivor. |
| Victims of domestic violence as victims need primarily psychological counseling to treat their low self-esteem, depression and masochism. Cognitive therapy that addresses attributions of blame for the abuse may also be particularly effective in motivating the victim. | Survivors of abuse need, most of all, access to resources that would enable them to escape the batterer. Community services need to be coordinated to assure the needed allocation of resources and integrated to assure long-term comprehensive intervention. |