

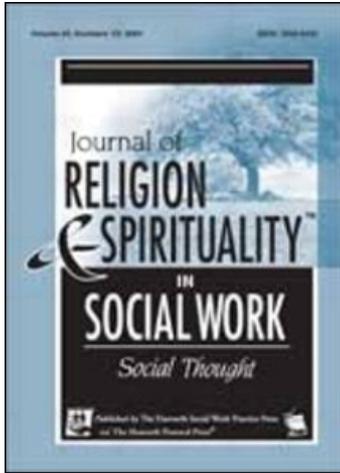
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Publisher Routledge

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Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t792306957>

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Online publication date: 04 May 2010

To cite this Article Jacinto, George A. , Turnage, Barbara F. and Cook, Ida (2010) 'Domestic Violence Survivors: Spirituality and Social Support', Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought, 29: 2, 109 – 123

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/15426431003708220

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15426431003708220>

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Domestic Violence Survivors: Spirituality and Social Support

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A review of the literature revealed that few domestic violence programs include ongoing social support or a focus on the spiritual concerns of domestic violence survivor. The literature appears to support the development of this spirituality and support group theory and confirms the importance of caring communities for domestic violence survivors and thrivers. The focus of this article is to propose a model of spirituality and social support for domestic violence survivors and thrivers. A synthesis of the Rite of Passage framework in combination with the Dance of the Spirit spiritual growth theory of Maria Harris is presented. An outline of a seven week spirituality group for those who have left the domestic violence situation is presented and implications for practice are discussed.

KEYWORDS *domestic violence, spirituality support group, dance of the spirit, rites of passage*

Domestic violence (DV) survivors, as they work to restore their lives, experience a journey that is accompanied by ambivalence and confusion or by an understanding that life's direction must change in order to return to a sense of normalcy. DV survivors are faced with many challenges that result from their multiple roles as wife or husband, daughter or son, mother or father, and the added role as victim, survivor, and thriver. The increasing

Received July 2, 2009; accepted November 19, 2009.

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demand placed on the victim role as it relates to the other roles of family members is heightened as the abusive relationship progresses. DV survivors may experience a range of stressors and accumulated feelings that can lead to physical harm, physical illness, mental distress, and suicide (Ennis, Campbell, & Courtois, 1997; Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000). These individuals often experience a significant amount of time working through their feelings during the initial steps of intervention and after the abusive environment has been left behind. Furthermore, some DV survivors may experience complications in the grief process as it relates to their relationship with the abuser and are unable to work through their unfinished business in order to thrive.

While engaged in the activities of daily living, DV survivors often blame themselves for the abuser's actions resulting from the abuser harming the DV survivors or other family members. Even after the relationship with the abuser has ended, an ensuing feeling of guilt continues to require the DV survivor to work through unfinished business. An important part of the process of resolving unfinished business is self-forgiveness, which can be described as "fostering compassion, generosity, and love toward oneself" (Enright, 1996, p. 116). Self-forgiveness may be the final part of the therapeutic process used by DV survivors as they work through all of the uncomfortable feelings relating to their relationship with the abuser. By moving through the process of self-forgiveness, survivors and thrivers may ameliorate the possibility of developing chronic physical illness and mental distress. Facilitating the self-forgiveness process as part of the transition from survivor to thriver is an essential function of social workers in their work with DV survivors. Protective factors that can assist social workers in working with DV survivors include development of a social support network, exploring spiritual/religious beliefs, and the development of adaptive patterns of coping.

This paper will focus on DV survivors who lived with abusers for a period of time and have made the decision to end the abusive relationship. While many survivors may have spent short periods of time in domestic violence shelters, they would have spent more time living with the abusive person. Therefore spirituality and development of an ongoing social support network among DV survivors will be described. The steps of spiritual development described by Harris (1989) will be discussed, and implications for a support group intervention model will be presented. A Rites of Passage framework extrapolated from the work of van Genep (1960) will be used to describe and punctuate each stage that DV survivors experience as they transition through the roles of victim, survivor, and thriver.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The domestic violence literature has recently begun to include consideration of religious and spiritual concerns of DV survivors (Cairns-Descoteaux, 2005).

Many domestic violence survivors have reported that their spiritual and religious needs were not addressed in DV shelters (Gillum, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2006; Senter & Caldwell, 2002; Watlington & Murphy, 2006). Recent studies of African-American women have indicated that religion and spirituality are important personal concerns that impact the DV survivors healing process (Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004; Gillum et al., 2006; Potter, 2007; Senter & Caldwell, 2002; Watlington & Murphy, 2006). While the literature provides insights into the experiences of domestic violence survivors and offers implications for practice, there is a dearth of material that suggests interventions that incorporate the spiritual and religious dimension as part of the healing process.

Spirituality and Religion

A central concern articulated by DV survivors is that they prefer to include discussion about spirituality and religion as part of their healing process. Gillum and colleagues (2006) reported that 97% of the respondents to their survey indicated that spirituality or God was a source of their strength. Christian women reported that they did not believe the church would help them and that clergypersons often supported the batterer (Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000; Potter, 2007; Watlington, & Murphy, 2006). African-American women were more likely to engage in praying as a coping strategy. They were less likely to seek help from mental health professionals than were Caucasian women (El-Khoury et al., 2004). Potter (2007) reported that only 8 of 40 women surveyed sought assistance from a cleric. Of these, all women reported that their experience with their cleric was negative.

Muslim women reported more satisfaction with the responses from their Imam and the community of worshippers at the Mosque (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003; Potter, 2007). The Muslim women who reported increased use of spirituality in working with their circumstances also reported few symptoms of depression and reported increased social support (Watlington & Murphy, 2006).

Social Support

DV survivors often find themselves isolated by the abusive relationship, and this isolation limits their options in leaving the relationship. Many of the DV survivors expressed the importance of social support in assisting them with the decision and providing resources in order for them to leave the abusive relationship (Cairns-Descoteaux, 2002; El-Khoury et al., 2004). Banks-Wallace and Parks (2004) reported on the significant effects that resulted from storytelling among survivors. A narrative approach to healing appears to be an effective method of helping DV survivors move on from the abusive relationship. Storytelling among survivors in a safe environment provides needed social support during critical times when individuals are in the

process of leaving an abusive relationship (Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004; Watlington & Murphy, 2006). Finding a supportive group of individuals who are experiencing domestic violence and others who have left abusive relationships and have begun to thrive may offer DV survivors support as they make difficult decisions to leave the abusive relationship.

There are several studies of domestic violence survivors that address spirituality and social support (Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004; Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000; Potter, 2007). Other studies cite paternalistic religious views, primarily from Christian clergymen, that endanger domestic violence survivors (Potter, 2007; Watlington & Murphy, 2006; Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004). The use of prayer was prevalent among African-American women who used spirituality and a relationship with God as a significant coping strategy (Gillum et al., 2006). Senter and Caldwell (2002) conducted a small qualitative study that revealed the following themes: (a) recognizing the truth/reality of the abusive relationship; (b) adjusting to the new living situation; (c) processing feelings of anger, fear, and loss; (d) rediscovering the self; (e) engaging in self reflection; (f) returning to the development of supportive relationships; and (g) returning to faith-based beliefs and practices.

Mental Health Intervention

The women in several of the studies indicated that counseling and therapy were helpful to them in processing what needed to be done in order to move on with their lives. Several techniques seem to be of particular benefit for survivors. The questions involved in providing Reality Therapy (Turnage, Jacinto, & Kirven, 2003) can assist clients in exploring their situations in life and planning for the future. The combination individual and group psychotherapy (Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000), including Reality Therapy (Glasser, 2000) and Narrative Therapy (Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004; Brown & Augusts-Scott, 2006) techniques appear to be a powerful approach to addressing issues related to DV. These two forms of therapy can be easily incorporate spiritual/religious concerns of the survivors. In the group setting participants were able to share their stories and hear others' stories that may move them to a new level of understanding and perspective (Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004;). Journaling can also be used as an insight tool in helping clarify patterns of relating to romantic partners, discovering personal character strengths, and reviewing one's abilities and dreams (Progoff, 1992).

rites of passage and dance of the spirit frameworks

The Rites of Passage framework consists of three distinct interlocking stages: *separation*, *transition*, and *aggregation* (van Genep, 1960). As DV survivors

transition through the intervention process they experience distinct stages. This pattern of stages appears to parallel the rites of passage framework described by van Gennep. Van Gennep was an anthropologist studying rites of passage from several cultures. While he did not specifically discuss domestic violence, the discussion that follows will apply a rites of passage framework to the journey of DV survivors as they progressively transition to permanently leaving the abusive situation and move toward independence and thriving. The three stages of the rites of passage a person experiences when working through issues related to domestic violence include the following:

1. *Separation*: In the victim role a person may leave and return to the abusive environment several times and eventually decide to permanently leave the abusive environment. As DV survivors' first test out separation from and return to the abusive situation, they develop intuition that acts as a warning system, which eventually may lead to a severance of the abusive living situation. After several domestic violence shelter stays, victims may become ready to seek interventions for themselves as survivors. Separation is the point in time when DV survivors determine they are leaving and not returning to the domestic violence relationship.
2. *Transition*: At this point the person moves into the survivor role and enters into a transitional time where she or he is assisted by an intervention program that may include alternative living arrangements, psychotherapy, working on personal spirituality, building a social support network, attending to family matters, establishing credit, and continuing or finding employment or seeking training for employment. During this stage a person feels betwixt and between the abusive environment and the nonabusive environment where she or he plans to move. Finally, DV survivors start to thrive in their new roles that are supported and affirmed by their social support network.
3. *Aggregation*: When survivors or thrivers reenter their communities of origin they are recognized differently than when they began the transition that resulted in them leaving the abusive relationship. Their community responds to the DV survivors in a new role. After becoming independent the survivors may transition to the thriver role and continue to work on personal issues and establish a new personal affirming lifestyle.

In order to thrive DV survivors need support and encouragement that may include sharing their journey with others, developing social support of caring peers, working on personal spirituality, and becoming active members of their community. The following discussion will explain the steps described in *Dance of the Spirit: The Seven Steps of Women's Spirituality* (Harris, 1989). The steps described by Harris provide a pathway to thriving that encompasses a new understanding of the self and transition to a new way of life.

Maria Harris (1989) outlines seven steps that individuals experience as they move through issues in their lives and come to a point of insight and self-actualization. The spirituality steps described by Harris include *awakening*, *discovering*, *creating*, *dwelling*, *nourishing*, *traditioning*, and *transforming*. The following is an extrapolation of Harris's seven steps as they apply to the experience of domestic violence survivors.

Awakening

The DV survivors enter the dance after realizing that they can no longer continue living in an abusive relationship. The survivors become aware of and develop ideas about alternative ways of living that are free of violence. At this point the DV survivors begin to explore aspects of their lives that have been unexamined. This step represents the *separation* stage described by van Gennepe (1960) as the beginning point of a rite of passage. During this exploration the DV survivor gains new insights about the self and a sense that there are forgotten personal characteristics as well as newly revealed characteristics. The awakening phase of the dance surfaces many mysteries about the self that brings new respect and esteem for the past, present, and emerging self (Harris, 1989, p. 4). When viewing one's strengths and areas of growth a holistic image of the self becomes clear, giving survivor's personal strength and resolve to reframe life roles. Once aware that things in one's life must change, it is time for the next step in the dance.

Discovering

As the dance intensifies, unconscious material begins to emerge as the person looks inward. The inner territory offers awareness about the self that has been unexamined and in this territory new ideas emerge that contribute to positive self-esteem. While focusing on the intuition of the higher self, a person may also encounter the shadow self that is located in the person's unconscious (Harris, 1989, p. 30). Jung (1959) asserts that to meet one's shadow is to see one's own light, and "[a]nyone who perceives his shadow and his light simultaneously sees himself from two sides and thus gets in the middle" (Jung, 1991, p. 872). Discovery is about finding inward treasure and the holistic contents of one's own yin and yang. Later the realization comes that all humans have shadow material and in light of one's own shadow the survivor will be better equipped to work through self-forgiveness. The new insights, awarenesses, and wisdom discovered will need to be integrated into one's own sense of meaning and purpose. As the dance continues the next step allows for the inner artist to emerge in order to fashion a new sense of being and wholeness.

A Break in the Dance Steps

Often during the time the DV survivor lives in a shelter she or he gets to a certain step of the dance and returns to his or her previous abusive environment. For them they are not quite ready to move forward. Perhaps they have not had the opportunity to *discover* important information about themselves or maybe they are too afraid to leave the abusive relationship. There are usually several instances of leaving and seeking help before a survivor completely leaves the abuser. Ennis and colleagues (1997) asserted that domestic violence victims participate in support services for brief periods of time and often return to the abusive relationship. They continue to use services for brief periods of time in response to a crisis. They become stabilized once the crisis passes and return. There are many reasons for returning to the abusive environment. Some of the most common involve lack of an alternative, safe living location, funds to live independently, and social support from a compassionate community as well as fear of physical harm or death. At some point many decide to continue in the dance and, having gone through the *awakening* and *discovery* steps several times, they move into the *creating* step.

Creating

The third step moves survivors into a space in which the learning and awareness of *awakening* and *discovery* are viewed from the lens of the inner artist. This step appears to be the beginning of the *transition* steps described by van Gennep (1960) in his description of rites of passage. This stage is characterized by the perception that one is betwixt and between what has come before and a different future filled with the possibility of experiencing wholeness that lays ahead (Turner, 1995). When entering the creative frame of mind, one becomes open to ways of drawing meaning from life events of the past in order to weave new meaning and direction in the present dance. The new vision of life is understood to be a creative journey with each day offering opportunities to cease the stuff of life and form it in imaginative ways. Synthesizing past experiences with the newfound personal awareness repositions survivors in their life path replacing their past roles and focusing toward thriving and actualizing personal potentials. Approaching life in this way, one becomes more aware of one's surroundings and the potential in each moment (Harris, 1989, p. 60). This viewpoint provides the person with unlimited possibilities instead of the one option of living in an abusive relationship. In the creative milieu the person is able to generate many alternative responses to life's problems. Life approached in this way is an ongoing work of art. When one is aware that she or he has completed the significant work for the period and needs to break from the energy of

creating, the next step will allow her or him the chance to experience the renewal of the self.

Dwelling

In the fourth step, Harris (1989, p. 87) suggests taking time to rest and allowing one's spirituality to surface. It involves tying together the many pieces of life into one tapestry. After one *awakens* to self, *discovers* untapped inner resources, and refashions life in a *creative* manner, it is time to rest and integrate the learning from the previous steps of the dance into the meaning of one's life. Dwelling allows a DV survivor to dialogue with other survivors and thrivers about their stories and to share her or his story. It is a time to recognize that many stories intersect with different themes and similar experiences. The dwelling time allows the survivor a chance to learn from sharing her or his story with others and to listen to the experiences and insights of other survivors as well. This social support opportunity allows individuals to encourage and help develop future goals and plans as a part of dwelling with their creative efforts. This is the step in which a person begins to move through the *return* as van Gennepe (1960) describes in the *Rites of Passage*. This stage in the journey may be a time in which to celebrate movement toward the *thrivers* role. After a restful interlude in which one *dwells* it is time to move to the next step.

Nourishing

The fifth step in the dance shifts the dancer's center of attention outward on the physical self. Now she or he is concerned with mental and physical well-being and establishing good health practices. Such practices as planning for a better diet and a regular exercise routine all contribute to the creative and spiritual energy necessary for one to continue the dance (Harris, 1989, p. 117). Nourishing is also a time for one to develop an understanding of what signs indicate something is not right in a relationship and to recognize what alternatives she or he has to address those issues. Without proper maintenance and holistic growth one's vision dims and there is a return to ways of being before one began the dance. The step of nourishing involves attending to one's own needs for sustenance and thriving and also includes nourishing others as well. Those who one may nourish include family members other than the abuser and other survivors one encounters in the domestic violence shelter or other programs in which the survivors engage. Nourishing brings strength and energy in order to empower the thrivers toward self-sufficiency and self-confidence to continue building a new life. The next step in the dance is about sharing. In this step, the survivor begins to reach out to others to integrate their growth.

Traditioning

The sixth step in the dance is referred to as *traditioning* (Harris, 1989), and this could also be the possible rites of passage stage labeled *aggregation* (van Gennep, 1960). At the conclusion of the *aggregation* stage of the rite of passage, the DV survivor returns to her or his community of origin (van Gennep, 1960). It is in this stage that a survivor returns to the community and is recognized as a renewed person. This step in Harris's (1989) *Dance of the Spirit* involves sharing one's dance with others. It is about giving and receiving, about sharing the richness of spirituality with others. It is about empowering and involving the next generation in the dance. The "dance-print of Traditioning" enriches the giver and provides a model of giving to the receiver the gifts of wisdom, love, and spirituality (Harris, 1989, p. 146). Traditioning is about continuing to be in the dance, and here one finds oneself in a new space taking on a new pace and a shift in the direction of the dancer's energy. Having begun to thrive the survivor becomes focused outward toward others. While continuing to attend to one's own inner resources, the dancer reaches out to others who are in the early steps of the dance. Sharing insights and wisdom from one's own dance, the thriver begins to reinforce and anchor the transformed personality, characteristics including renewed dignity and high self-esteem.

Transforming

The seventh step described by Harris (1989) involves the task of reaching out to others after the survivor has begun to wear the role of thriver. The thriver repositions self in the flow of life while regularly returning to the dance path of others from where he or she came. Because this Dance of the Spirit flows backward and forward in movement (Harris, 1989), thrivers are able to recognize that their dance is a dance they dance in all areas of life, and their fellow DV survivors and thrivers are among those they are traditioning as they are transformed by their presence and involvement in their lives. When thrivers allow the light of others to bring new awarenesses, thrivers gain new lenses to view the world they discover aspects of themselves that they had forgotten, they become change agents shining light on the beauty forgotten by others, they remove blinders that obstructed others' visions about their life goals, they transmit hope for others to find the strength to thrive as they view again their purpose for living, and ultimately they recognizes their mission in life. When we change ourselves by renewal we change the energy we emit to the world around us. In the experience of self-change we gain the ability to assist others in their own transformation. It is like giving birth to the self and others as we grow together in our communities of compassionate energy that engenders renewal of the earth (Harris, 1989, p. 181). This entire process can be used to build a community of survivors.

SEVEN WEEK GROUP INITIATION TO THE COMMUNITY OF SURVIVORS

An outline of a seven week spirituality group process to initiate survivors into a caring support community is presented. The purpose of the series of group activities is to help DV survivors locate themselves in the flow of their lives and receive affirmation from other group members who become co-mentors in a community. A brief description of the weekly meetings is described in the following sections.

Week One: Awareness

During the first week DV survivors will make a list of key events in their lives from birth to the present. They will look over the finished list and pick the one event that stands out to them at the present. They will share their insights about how that event is relevant to them today with the group. They also can use this as a journal exercise there they write about their insight.

Week Two: Exploring

This week the DV survivors will make a list of the key change points in their lives. The idea here is that they will look back and select one that stands out to them. They will discuss with the group the unfulfilled possibilities that may have been present if they had gone in the other direction. They may want to explore using one of the possibilities at this point in their life (Progoff, 1992). Progoff suggests that while one cannot go back in time it is possible for an individual to pursue an un-lived possibility at anytime in life.

Week Three: Focusing

Each DV survivor will list the different roles they perform in their life at the present time. They will discuss connections between their various roles and the feeling tone of each role. DV survivors will assess the positives and negatives of each role.

Week Four: Revisioning

During the fourth session survivors put together a picture of the kind of person they want to become. This week could include an art expression that depicts how the survivors would like their life to be as they move forward. A collage exercise may be helpful in visioning the roles survivors would like to assume. Each DV survivor will discuss her wishes and share

insights about what she may need to keep in mind when forming future relationships.

Week Five: Inner Reflection

Survivors will look inward and list all of the wise sentient beings (historical figures, family members, friends, pets, fictional characters) from whom they have received insight about the meaning of life. Survivors will select one of the figures and using mental imagery will converse with the figure about a question that is of concern to the DV survivor or thriver at this time in life. The survivors will then share in the group the wisdom that came from the chosen figure and how the pearls of wisdom relate to their life circumstances.

Week Six: Self-Compassion

Survivors will list significant experiences for which they believe they need to forgive themselves. They will list the situations, experiences, and circumstances for which they have unfinished business related to self-forgiveness. They will select one experience to work with. They will choose one of the items from the list and respond to the following question: What am I receiving from this that keeps me from forgiving myself? Next survivors write a letter to themselves as if it were from their best friend giving advice about self-forgiveness given the situation. In dyads each individual in turn will read a letter written by the other person in the dyad. The survivor who wrote the letter will respond to the person who reads the letter as if speaking to the friend. After the exchange between both parties the survivors will share with the group insights they have gained from the friend's input that can lead to forgiveness of the self. Survivors will be encouraged to share how they have forgiven themselves in the past.

Week Seven: Mentoring

This session serves as a closure for the group and introduction into the community of caring survivors and thrivers. Survivors will be reminded that they can benefit from mentoring themselves and others. The steps in the process are awareness, focusing, exploring, revisioning, inner reflection, and self-compassion. As survivors work through the steps they begin to actualize their potential as humans. An exercise that can be used here might be called "My Strengths." Each group member will become the focus of the group. Group members will write the strengths they see in the person on the "My Strengths" worksheet. Each person in the group will share her or his perceptions of the strengths of other group members, and each person will receive information about his or her strengths from the other group members.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The implications for practice provide social workers with many creative possibilities in developing social and spiritual support resources for DV survivors. The development of a supportive community is a major priority in order to provide ongoing social support for DV survivors and thrivers. The spiritual dimension of life is also an important element on which to focus in the intervention process of DV survivors and thrivers.

Community-Based Practice

An integral part of the *aggregation* stage in the Rite of Passage (van Genneep, 1960) is the community aspect of the of the individual's life. When DV survivors emerge from the aggregation stage their transformation is celebrated and recognized by the communities within which they participate. Their communities recognize them as different from the way they were in the abusive relationship that they have left. They continue to thrive as persons in their new roles. Their communities recognize them as different as they were in the abusive relationship that they have left. One of the challenges that face DV survivors and thrivers is the lack of a caring community of peers within which they can participate. The wider community where they lived in an abusive setting must now recognize that they have moved on in their lives, and they require respect and acceptance in their new roles. The need for a caring and nourishing community of DV survivors and thrivers to support them and allow them to support others is required by many in order for them to continue building on the vision of a thriving lifestyle. A good way to introduce DV survivors and thrivers to the support community would be to have them go through the seven week group initiating them into a community of survivors and thrivers.

The clinician can be an important impetus in the development of structures of support and thriving for DV survivors and thrivers. Assisting to build opportunities that empower and build on individual strengths and characteristics will establish new social structures that may more emergently embrace DV survivors in their initial exploration of ways to leave abusive relationships. This will allow those who have moved on in their lives an opportunity to support and nurture others who are pursuing the same goals.

Clinical Practice Implications

The DV survivor and thriver can benefit from individual and group interventions that initially assist them in moving beyond their old ways of viewing themselves, their oppressive relationships, and their dangerous

living environments. The steps of the *Dance of the Spirit* progressively support individuals in first developing an awareness that something is not right in their lives, discovering that there are alternatives to their living situation, and realizing that their experience of being abused is not “normal” for growth and well-being.

The implications for an intervention support group model include the concern for the DV survivors’ and thrivers’ spirituality, coping abilities, and social support. The social work practitioner can coach survivors and thrivers in the healing process. First, working with others in similar situations, DV survivors begin to create a renewed image of themselves and their future. DV survivors may revisit their hopes and dreams from earlier in life before they entered the abusive relationship. Drawing from earlier hopes and dreams the survivor begins to weave a new vision of the future based on their dreams and experiences. Next, the DV survivor may begin to reflect on creation of a dance that includes their children or others for whom they are responsible after leaving the abusive relationship. Fashioning a future that includes all of the people in their environment will begin to arrange community social support networks that were lost during their recent relationship.

CONCLUSION

Interestingly, abusers attempt to isolate the DV survivors from their social support network, making it more difficult to seek help. The many issues involved in leaving an abusive relationship make the transition to an abuse-free lifestyle a vexing and complex maze of physical and emotional tasks.

Development of ongoing support groups and caring communities of thrivers are important structures that need to be developed. Security concerns are of utmost importance throughout the DV survivor’s journey. At each stage in the process of leaving the abuser there can be a religious or spiritual dimension to the individual’s experience. Facilitating self-forgiveness in the context of a supportive community can help alleviate long-term depression and emotion related physical illness.

DV shelters and programs as well as religious and community organizations have the potential to develop caring community structures of support, including religious/spiritual and social support services as DV survivors enter and readjust to their communities. When the survivors leave the therapeutic environment as thrivers they require follow-up services and ongoing social support to ensure they are safe and able to meet their basic needs. The long-term effect of this spiritual program is that the DV thrivers become the mentors of DV survivors. Therefore the DV thrivers are able to further the dance into a new generation.

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