Homeless battered women experienced patterns of violence that represented phases in their abusive relationships

Clarke PN, Pendry NC, Kim YS. *Patterns of violence in homeless women*. *West J Nursing Res* 1997 Aug;19:490–500.

Objective

To describe the reported patterns of violence of homeless battered women and their experiences in seeking shelter.

Design

Exploratory qualitative study using semistructured interviews.

Setting

An urban and a rural women's shelter in southeastern USA.

Participants

7 women (age range 24–51 y) who had been battered by their male partner, were currently homeless because of battering, and were living in a shelter. 3 women were white and 4 were black. 4 women were unemployed. 3 were married, 2 had common law relationships, 1 was engaged to be married, and 1 had a boyfriend. All women had used alcohol or drugs in their most recent relationship. All women believed their homeless status was due to the extreme abuse they had experienced by their partner.

Methods

Each woman participated in an individual semistructured interview conducted in a private room at the shelter where she was staying. Efforts were made to ensure the privacy and comfort of participants. Women were encouraged to take breaks during the interview if their feelings became too painful. Interviews continued until data saturation was achieved. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim, and inductive thematic content analysis was done.

Main results

All participants had experienced severe physical abuse by their partner. The stories they recounted revealed that each participant had experienced multiple incidences of abuse. Themes

emerged relating to sequential phases in the participant's abusive relationship. The first phase of the relationship was described by themes of *Camelot* and *broken promises*. The Camelot theme was expressed by feelings of happiness, fulfilment, and love in the relationship. Shortly thereafter, partners commonly offered broken promises after a battering episode, such as "I'm sorry. I swear I'll never hit you again."

The second phase was described by themes of *isolation/shame* and *harassment/humiliation*. Participants isolated themselves because they felt shame and were afraid of their partner. Their partner harassed and humiliated them to create fear and uncertainty.

The third phase was described by themes of *power*, *placate*, and *terror*. Participants felt terror and felt intimidated by the power that they perceived their partner had. They described efforts to appease their partner as a strategy to impede the battering that they felt was imminent.

The fourth and final phase was described by concepts relating to *freedom-seeking behaviours* (*murderous thoughts*, *awakening*, and *escape*). Participants thought of using deadly force to stop the battering. These thoughts were followed up by an awakening or conscious awareness during which they shared their experience with another "safe" person. Participants began to recognise their personal worth again and realised that survival was imperative. Before searching for shelter, participants reported planning for escape.

Conclusion

Homeless battered women who were staying in shelters reported patterns of violence that represented 4 phases in their abusive relationship.

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Commentary

The study by Clarke *et al* enhances our understanding of the phases a woman goes through while in a violently abusive relationship as she works to understand her situation, survive, and secure an initial escape. These findings are consistent with those of other studies that have explored the process of leaving, highlighting the process of disengagement from the abusive relationship and the survivor's desire to seek freedom which is evident long before she is able to make an initial escape.^{1–4}

Setting an abusive relationship into distinct phases helps abused women to see themselves as active problem solvers and view their situation as hopeful. Understanding the gradual awakening and freedom seeking process helps nurses to iden-

tify opportunities for actively helping a survivor to escape, and helps nurses to empathise while also planting seeds for the woman to use as awakening occurs.

Caution should be exercised so that neither the phases of the relationship are viewed as linear nor a woman's escape regarded as an end point. We know that almost 75% of abused women who leave their abusive partner eventually return to the relationship, and that the process of leaving and the need for support extends long after the survivor has secured a place separate from the abuser.¹ Further research is needed to show how the phases of the relationship are re-enacted or modified when a survivor returns, how the process of leaving differs for survivors who have

experienced abuse in their families of origin, and to better understand what enables the awakening and leaving process.

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