Long-term Survivors' Coping and Resiliency Strategies After Leaving an Abusive Relationship: A Phenomenological Inquiry

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Abstract
Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a serious social problem and a noteworthy health issue internationally. In the United States, approximately 1.3 million women and 835,000 men experience a combination of cruel and violent treatment by an intimate partner. This phenomenological study used lived experiences from both men and women ranging in various ages from 40-70 years to understand their coping and resiliency strategies post-separation from an abusive relationship for 10 or more years. The conceptual framework was guided by Lazarus' transactional theory of coping and psychological stress and the theory of psychological resiliency, which is linked to understanding the ways long-term survivors are able to master, minimize, and tolerate the events of a stressful situation. Data were gathered on 15 participants through semistructured, in-depth interviews using a series of open-ended questions that captured the details of the participants' lived experiences, and provided a textual description to understanding their coping and resiliency strategies after leaving an abusive relationship. Interviews were analyzed using a phenomenological technique by extracting themes. The central themes that emerged based on the 6 interview questions were encounters of physical and emotional abuse, passive and submissive behaviors, supportive services, becoming self-sufficient, and developing their self-efficacy. The findings and recommendations from this study can advance positive social change and interventions for mental health professionals providing services and enhance the IPV survivors’ ability to find a continuum of care that could be effective in keeping a positive change while shaping the outcome of future life events.

Some survivors cope with the sense of confusion by engaging in compulsive sexual behaviors with women or by reenacting the abuse with other men (Alaggia & Millington, 2008; Romano & De Luca, 2001; Schraufnagel, Davis, George, & Norris, 2010). In relationships, male survivors often report intrusive memories of CSA and a variety of sexual dysfunctions, such as erectile dysfunction, sexual anorexia, or hyper-sexuality (Andersen, 2008). Some male survivors report unwanted sexual compulsions or engage in offending sexual behavior (Schraufnagel et al., 2010). Common escape behaviors of m