

Model explains how abused moms decide to leave

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Two University of Illinois scientists have found a way to help health-care providers, social workers, and abused women's families understand the stages that these women go through when deciding to leave their partners.

"The process of leaving an abusive relationship can take years, and there may be many attempts before a woman finally leaves permanently. It can be a frustrating experience for the people who are trying to help her, especially if they don't understand the stages that women go through before they are able to leave," said Jennifer Hardesty, a U of I assistant professor of human and community development.

Hardesty and graduate student Lyndal Khaw, who adapted Prochaska and DiClemente's Stages of Change model for the study, said there are clear markers that help identify where an abused woman is in the process of leaving. However, not all women leave in the same way, they said.

"Some women get hung up moving from the thinking stages to the action stages," Khaw said. "Especially in the later stages, there can be a lot of back-and-forthing. If a woman is driven to react in a dramatic way, she may even leapfrog over a stage."

Khaw worked with 19 mothers who were divorcing or seeking to modify their custody or child support arrangements. The participants indicated that their former husbands had committed at least one of seven acts of physical abuse more than once.

The women's turning points and trajectories were plotted on blank maps of the model, which includes five stages:

- precontemplation, when women are often in denial about the abuse
- contemplation, when mothers begin to realize they are in an abusive relationship
- preparation, often marked by a pileup of abusive episodes and noticeable effects of the violence on the children
- action, for which three trajectories
- either regaining control of their lives or letting go of their desire to make the marriage work
- holding back (regressing to the preparation or contemplation stages), and
- leaping directly from contemplation to action—were identified
- maintenance, a process in which women reclaim their identity and often continue to deal with an ex-husband's attempts to control them through their children.

“The information we gained will help us tailor advice and resources to women, depending on the stage they're in. We'll be able to meet them where they are,” Khaw said.

“When people learn that a woman is being abused, there's a tendency to encourage her to leave. But a woman who's in the first two ‘thinking’ stages of the model may not be ready to call a shelter. She may be blaming herself and telling herself: If I'd just shut up, he wouldn't have slapped me,” she explained.

“When this woman does reach the planning stage, she'll then be ready to accept help—for example, securing a safe mailbox, establishing a separate bank account, or hiding her children's social security cards,” she said.

At each turning point, children seemed to play an important role in mothers' decision making, Khaw said. Fifty-three percent of the mothers were moved to action in order to protect their children. "He only used a gun once, and that's when I decided to leave," one participant said.

The U of I study is unique in distinguishing multiple turning points in the stages of leaving.

"It's important that practitioners offer support-based interventions that will help mothers cope with the physical and emotional issues surrounding multiple exits and returns. Some women must gradually gain the confidence and resources needed to sustain that final exit," the scientists said.

The researchers want to continue working with the model, expanding it to include women's diverse experiences, she said.

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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