

Professors recommend improvements for domestic, substance abuse survivors based on experiences volunteering in shelters

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Surviving domestic violence is a harrowing ordeal on its own. For those who spend time escaping abuse in shelters, they often find additional challenges navigating the system, especially if substance abuse is involved in some way. A University of Kansas professor has co-authored three studies detailing the experiences of women's navigation of, and tensions in, a domestic violence shelter and a substance abuse center.

Adrienne Kunkel, professor of communication studies at KU, along with Jennifer Guthrie, assistant professor of [communication studies](#) at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and a former student of Kunkel's, volunteered at Harbor Safe House (a pseudonym), a [domestic violence](#) shelter, and Guthrie also volunteered at New Day (a pseudonym), a [substance abuse treatment](#) center. They have authored articles on the experiences of survivors of domestic violence and have recommended several pragmatic steps that shelters, as well as substance abuse centers, can take to better serve survivors, make services more efficient and help women escape the cycle of both domestic violence and substance abuse.

One study, published in the journal *Communication Quarterly* explored the topic of overlapping domestic and substance abuse.

"Alcohol and drug abuse and domestic violence are commonly linked, yet they are almost always viewed as separate problems," Kunkel said. "And even in cases where they are recognized as being related, women

trying to overcome them often face messages that are conflicting or even contradictory. For instance, domestic violence survivors are told they need to be independent and break free of the abusive situation but are also told they are powerless over addiction.

"We encourage women to be independent of their previous lives, yet they are still very dependent on the shelter. There's a very fine line between dependence and independence that can be difficult to recognize and navigate."

Substances are frequently factors in abusive relationships. And though many shelters prohibit the use of substances on their premises, it is nonetheless quite common for women to turn to drugs or alcohol to self-soothe as they deal with the stresses of having been abused.

Compounding the problem, services that deal with domestic violence and substance abuse frequently are viewed as two separate entities and often don't work well together. This argument was featured prominently in Guthrie and Kunkel's *Communication Quarterly* article.

"They are two systems that have very altruistic goals, but there are different approaches to each, and even some territoriality involved," Kunkel said.

Further work completed by Kunkel and Guthrie centers on the role of narratives of domestic violence as they are understood culturally and even expressed individually by survivors of abuse. In their second recent article, featured in 2015 in the journal *Women & Language*, the researchers portray problems with a culture-wide, uniform application of a "formula story" wherein an "evil villain" terrorizes a "pure victim" with severe physical violence. Due to such widespread broad conceptions of domestic violence, many women fail to realize that they are experiencing it.

In a third article, published in the *Western Journal of Communication*, Kunkel and Guthrie explore the paradoxes and tensions women commonly experience in domestic violence shelters. An especially common problem survivors faced was the need to shift their narratives, or tell the story of their experiences differently, depending on who they were telling it to. The practice is one people take part in every day, often without even realizing it. But when domestic violence survivors frame their story differently to different audiences—depending on the situation like seeking housing, protection from abuse orders or clothing vouchers—they can be viewed as less than honest or as embellishing their story. And Kunkel's previous research, based on that of social psychologist James Pennebaker, indicates that telling one's distressful story completely and fully garners significant psychological and physical gains; altering and reshaping their narratives is likely to deny survivors the full benefits of such disclosure.

"All marginalized groups, including survivors of domestic violence, hate crimes or other incidents, feel the need to shift the narrative for particular audiences," Kunkel said. "We all know when we want things in life we have to go certain places and talk to people in certain ways. But to see it play out in this situation was heartbreaking."

Based on that, and other challenges the authors saw domestic violence survivors confronted with, they made five practical recommendations shelters could implement to better serve women.

First, they recommend reconsidering the standard 30-day limit on stays at shelters. The long-standing policies are often enacted because space is limited and to keep people from becoming completely dependent on the shelters. However, it can be extremely difficult to escape an abusive situation and make major life changes in such a brief period of time. So many women in interviews pointed to the stay limit as an obstacle that Kunkel and Guthrie recommend offering a 45-day (or longer) stay to

those who demonstrate they need the extra time.

In relation to the aforementioned problem of dependence, the authors recommend striking a balance between it and independence. By implementing "individualized tailoring," or using a modified empowerment and case management approach, shelters could provide and demonstrate tools women need to recover, as opposed to telling survivors exactly what to do and when.

Third, providing dedicated listeners could address the problem of shifting narratives. Understanding the tension between what Kunkel and Guthrie labeled as "narrative accuracy" and "narrative efficacy" could help prevent the need for survivors to tell their stories in multiple ways, to be accused of dishonesty, or to miss out on the varied benefits of full disclosure.

"Recognizing limitations and working together among shelter staff could also help improve services," Kunkel and Guthrie wrote.

Women's shelters are often very dependent on government grants to operate. Yet, the people who work to secure funding are not always aware of the challenges staff working with survivors are facing, and vice versa. That often leads to situations of bureaucratic hurdles for both camps.

Finally, the authors call for increased understanding of the link between domestic violence and substance abuse. Just realizing the two can be closely related, and that it can be counterproductive to only address one problem, could go a long way in helping women recover from both situations, they argue. Moreover, efforts to foster collaboration and align agencies directed at each issue may greatly improve outcomes.

Kunkel and Guthrie will present a portion of their findings in October at

the 2016 Organization for the Study of Communication, Language, and Gender conference in Chicago. They also have several other articles in the works and ultimately plan to collect their findings in a book to help both survivors of domestic and substance abuse, as well as the staff at domestic violence shelters and [substance abuse](#) centers dedicated to serving them.

Provided by University of Kansas

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