Understanding the healing potential of a community: Women's lived experience of social support and intimate partner violence

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Intimate Partner Violence

- IPV involves a partner perpetrating physical, sexual, and/or psychological violence to maintain power and control over the other

- One-third of women in the U.S. have experienced rape, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner, and nearly half of women have experienced psychological aggression (Black et al., 2011)

- Associated with physical health and mental health issues

The Problem

- Two-thirds of women who experience IPV access social support in response to abuse (Goodman et al., 2003)

- Social support may bolster survivor's self-esteem, reduce helplessness, and cope with the experience of violence (Carlson et al., 2002)

- Limited research on negative social interactions regarding IPV disclosures on women's health (Gugurge et al., 2012)

The Problem

- Social networks help and harm survivors' well-being:
  - Negative responses from assumed sources of support may decrease survivors' well-being and increase risk for future abuse

  - Trotter and Allen (2009) found that 78% of women experiencing IPV reported receiving negative and mixed reactions from friends or family members (both negative and positive reactions).

Purpose of Study

❖ Establish a more complete understanding of the experience of social support among women with current or a history of IPV and the influence of social support on the outcome of IPV

❖ Implications for community outreach, therapeutic interventions, and sources of support in terms of how to provide positive, appropriate, and effective social support for female survivors of IPV

Methods

- Phenomenological approach: Open-ended, individual interviews lasting 60-120 minutes

- 9 adult women recruited from support groups at a social services agency supporting families and survivors of IPV

- Analysis involved identifying statements and quotes that represented themes and formulated a textural description and structural description of their experience

All participants described negative experiences with informal and formal resources when seeking support

- Friends, family members, mental health providers, justice system
- Criticism, judgment, avoidance, denial, encouragement to return to abuse, lack of protection
- Less likely to seek out support if they experienced a negative reaction

Quotes from Participants

"'Maybe you did something to provoke this.' '**What's wrong with you?**' It wasn't good enough that he just came in drunk and put his hands on me and he just felt like it. Those things wasn't good enough." (Maria)

"There was one time that I actually ran, I left from the house. I fought him for my keys to my car, to run to my mother's house. Because I just needed to get away. But once I got there, I was told, '**Go back home to your man**.' Like, 'That's your business.'" (Nancy)

"And that's one thing that the psychologist told me, 'You have to work on conflict resolution.' But, like, she doesn't even know me, she's just giving me parenting strategies. She hasn't seen me with my kids or asked me how I handle situations. Don't just judge me based on things my sisters have said." (Patricia)

Participants felt dehumanized and stigmatized by their social environment

- Gender discrimination, inadequate resources for survivors, dismissal of IPV, victim-blaming

- Experienced this as disempowering, dehumanizing, and marginalizing

- Internalized stigma inhibited help-seeking

Quotes from Participants

"Because it's just more plausible to be, like, 'Well, she's crazy, so ignore her.' It's sad because people would rather turn a blind eye to it and not involve themselves and then you kind of **suffer in silence** until you can find a place like this or a place where people get it and a place where you can finally have a voice because oftentimes outside of here you don't have a voice." (Beth)

"**You're not a human being to people** outside of [Sarah's Inn]. They want you for what they want you for and they don't want you as an actual person. Don't have feelings, don't this. It's the same thing in court. Don't have feelings, don't show emotion, don't do anything but be kind of robotic in life. And don't make waves and don't speak up, you know, because, especially because when you do speak up**, people are very quick and ready to shut you down**." (Jennifer)

"It's such a hollow life to go through. **Nobody cares about you**. Nobody wants to hear your story." (Patricia)

Quotes continued…

"So you're grieving a relationship, you're trying to fight to be respected. You're trying to **fight for respect** from the community, the police. Because when you're dealing with the system – justice or legal – they always, 'Well, women go back. And I don't want to get involved.' So it's like you have so many different things that you're trying to navigate at the same time and it's hard that that's what makes you want to go back. Because **at least it was something you could manage to an extent**, you know?" (Deborah)

Participants experienced empowerment, acceptance, and hope from caring and supportive resources

- Sense of belonging and decreased isolation

- Regaining their "voice," self-efficacy, and self-awareness to regain power

- Attributed identity development and self-exploration to social support

Quotes from Participants

"I'm getting to the point where now **I have a voice**. Because then it was pretty much do as I was told or asked. But now I have a voice in the matter." And I make a difference in my life. And a man does not justify me as a woman. **I am a human being**. I do not have to take any negative abuse from anyone." (Donna)

Was that really me? Or was that, did I do that because of my partner at the time? So, just like, **totally rediscovering who I am or who I want to be.** I think [the support group] definitely opened up my eyes...I wish it wouldn't have come to this, but, yeah, now I'm finally with some help, like, really thinking about that, like kind of excited to find out where it leads me. (Beth)

Conclusions

Social environment significantly contributes to women's experience of IPV and impacts the outcome of IPV

- Potential to disempower and dehumanize survivors or provide hope and acceptance and offer a space for survivor to regain power

  - Positive support may enhance psychological mindedness, identity development, redefining of relationships
  - Negative interactions may lead to internalized stigma and decrease help-seeking and risk for future abuse

Implications

How can the social environment empower rather than marginalize and stigmatize female survivors of violence?

- Engaging the community in addressing this health issue, public vs. private issue

- Network-oriented intervention to support the social network of survivors

- Bystander trainings, trainings for mental health and medical professionals

References

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