Improving strategies of IPV victims through understanding the effects of personality on IPV victims' interpretation and stress management

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Through studies of intimate partner violence (IPV), researchers have found informal and formal support strategies to be more effective than strategies at stopping abuse and preventing revictimization (Liang et al., 2005). Social support, informal or formal, provides resources, advice, and emotional outlets that a victim may otherwise lack; however, "women appear to be most likely to use strategies, such as placating or resistance, to combat IPV" (Liang et al., 2005, p. 73). Because many victims of IPV utilize strategies rather than informal or formal support strategies, organizations have attempted to indirectly improve victims' strategies through awareness campaigns and accessible information resources. Improved strategy tools may be developed through understanding how personality differences in interpretation and stress management influence help-seeking behavior.

Personality's Effects on Interpretation

The unique ways in which victims interpret their abuse influence critical points in their help-seeking processes. Victims must recognize and define abuse as a problem before they can begin planning solutions (Liang et al., 2005). Because strategies hinder victims' access to external perspectives, victims who use strategies must rely on their own interpretations of abuse.

Psychologist George Kelly believed "people have a few key constructs that they habitually apply in interpreting their world" (Larsen & Buss, 2018, p. 376). He referred to these constructs as personal constructs. Kelly suggested that "no two people have the same personal construct system, and so [individuals] have their own unique interpretation of the world" (p. 376). When applying this analysis of personality to IPV victims, each victim may interpret their

abuse differently due to individual, interpersonal, and sociocultural influences on their personal construct system.

Unfortunately, some personal constructs impede victims' ability or willingness to recognize and define abuse. For example, "particular social, religious, and cultural institutions…reinforce power inequalities between men and women" (Liang et al., 2005, p. 75). If a woman has a personal construct that includes this power inequality, she may not define her husband's abusive behavior as a problem that needs to be solved; instead, it is her "cross to bear" (Liang et al., 2005, p. 76). Likewise, men who are victims of IPV may possess this same personal construct and therefore hesitate to define their wife's abusive behavior as a problem due to the fear of being seen as weak.

Additionally, George Kelly suggests "anxiety is the result of our personal constructs failing to make sense of our circumstances" (Larsen & Buss, 2018, p. 376). When victims experience discomfort and anxiety from failed personal constructs, they can become vulnerable to self-doubt and thus reconsider their previous appraisal that abuse is a problem. Many people possess the construct that abusers in abusive relationships are always abusive and cold to their victims; however, "the actual nature, severity, and presence of violence in an intimate relationship may be constantly shifting, with abusers alternating between violence and loving contrition" (Liang et al., 2005, p. 75). Researchers have found that this shifting between violent and loving behavior causes IPV victims to "cognitively reconstruct past violent episodes, reframing and redefining their meanings" (Lempert, 1997, as cited in Liang et al., 2005, p. 75).

If the personal concept being threatened relates to the victim's self-concept, it is likely that the victim may also suffer self-esteem and self-efficacy issues. For example, a victim who believes 'bad things only happen to bad people' may be unable to understand why they are being

abused when they try their best to be a good person and partner. The victim may then develop an external locus of control, believing that they are unable to influence their abusive situation.

This state of believing events are out of one's control is considered learned helplessness (Larsen & Buss, 2018). Learned helplessness further impedes victims' ability to define abuse as a problem. For example, "women living in poverty with fewer resources available may be less free to conceptualize the problem as intolerable because of the unlikelihood that the problem will be solved" (Liang et al., 2005, p. 75).

Personality's Effects on Stress Management

Personality also influences how victims cope with stress and therefore influences their mental health (Larsen & Buss, 2018). In a study comparing women IPV victims to a control group of women, researchers found that women victims of IPV demonstrate higher levels of Harm Avoidance as well as lower levels of Self-Directedness, a pairing that translates to higher scores of neuroticism (Moreira et al., 2019). This is significant because "people who score high on the trait of neuroticism are also likely to rate their personal projects as stressful, difficult, likely to end in failure, and outside of their control" (Larsen & Buss, 2018, p. 384). This pessimistic perspective of goals could contribute to an increased risk of experiencing learned helplessness. It could also encourage disengagement strategies, which are "associated with increased risk for revictimization" (Iverson et al., 2013, p. 107).

Additionally, Harm Avoidance in women victims of IPV "may influence the ability of IPV victims to conceive of, plan, and then actively seek new experiences (i.e., new relationships)" (Moreira et al., 2019, IPV and personality characteristics section, para. 2). Studies have found that PTSD contributes to IPV revictimization and inhibits positive coping abilities as well; the "heightened physiological arousal and emotion dysregulation" associated with the

PTSD hyperarousal symptom cluster may contribute to revictimization by "imped[ing] survivors' ability to detect and/or respond to actual risk" (Iverson et al, 2013, p. 107).

Conclusion

While it is important to continue encouraging the use of informal and formal support strategies, the reality is many IPV victims are unwilling or unable to access social support. Therefore, psychologists and IPV organizations must also work to help IPV victims improve their strategies.

One avenue that has been explored is mobile application design. Several application developers have attempted to create discreet mobile apps that provide victims access to IPV information and action plans while pretending to be weather apps or news apps. A discreet mobile application may provide promising results to victims who prefer strategies, as long as proper measures are taken to hide the purpose of the app from abusers. Effective app features could include a Plan section and a Learn section as previously mentioned. Another effective section that is missing in many violence apps could include a Journal section.

The Plan section could offer pre-made plans designed to guide victims through the many challenges of leaving abusive relationships such as securing safe shelter or combatting depression. Pre-made plans would benefit victims who struggle with cognitive inhibition due to stress, and the simplicity of plans may help prevent disengagement coping such as problem avoidance.

Since IPV victims define their abuse problem differently, all plans could relate to one of four general categories such as Safety, Resources, Relationships, and Well-being in order to hopefully cover the needs motivating each victim's decision to leave their abuser. These four

categories reference the first four tiers of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: Physiological, Safety, Belongingness, and Esteem (Larsen & Buss, 2018, p. 346).

Another way of addressing individual differences in personality could be through providing the app algorithm with a detailed profile of the individual if they feel comfortable entering information into the app. The app could ask individuals to provide personal information such as their gender, ethnicity, age, sexuality, parental status, disabilities, and other factors that create diverse IPV experiences. The individual could then take a screening test to provide the algorithm information about which types of abuse the individual is experiencing as well as the individual's coping style. As a final piece of personalization, the individual could rank the plan categories (Safety, Resources, Relationships, and Well-being) from highest to lowest priority based on how they interpret their situation. The individual's personal information, their screening tool results, and their prioritization of needs, could all be used by an algorithm to recommend both help strategies and information that match the individual.

As mentioned, many IPV victims experience learned helplessness. Psychologists suggest those experiencing learned helplessness "need someone who can see the situation objectively and who can recommend strategies for solving the problem" (Larsen & Buss, 2018, p. 381). Offering easy app access to IPV information and action plans created by professional help providers may serve this need for objective perspectives and strategies, though it may not always be as effective as informal or formal support. Additionally, plans could be broken into easy-to-manage subgoals. Researchers have found that "accomplishing each subgoal [of a complex task] along the way can increase overall self-efficacy" (Larsen & Buss, 2018, p. 385).

Because victims of IPV suffer mental health challenges due to differences in coping styles, it could be beneficial to include a journal section in the app. Disclosure, even when

written, can reduce stress and help prevent risk of developing mental disorders, as it "helps put one's feelings into perspective and make some sense out of the events in one's life" (Larsen & Buss, 2018, p. 575). This may help victims define their abuse as well.

Though an app may never replace informal or formal support strategies, it may offer guidance and a place for disclosure to victims who employ strategies, which could increase their chances for successfully leaving abusive relationships.

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