

**Effects of Increased Perceived Self-Efficacy Through Creative Opportunities on the
Cycle of Violence: Empowering Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence**

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**Please note:* all names of participants have been changed in this paper for security and confidentiality purposes.

Abstract

Intimate partner violence affects one in every four American women (Black et al., 2011; Burge et al, 2016). This violence is complicated and comes in many forms including physical, mental, emotional, financial, and spiritual. Survivors of domestic violence frequently have symptoms of depression, anxiety, and PTSD, as well as a diminished self-image. Creative therapies provide an outlet for expression and may help build confidence. Increased self-efficacy and confidence may improve the self-image that was damaged by intimate partner violence and assuage the negative psychological symptoms caused by the violence. This increased confidence and efficacy was witnessed through working with here there and EVERYwhere, a nonprofit that offers art therapy to survivors of domestic violence.

Effects of Increased Perceived Self-Efficacy Through Creative Opportunities on the Cycle of Violence: Empowering Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence

Domestic violence, also known as intimate partner violence, is a pervasive problem in the United States, with one in every four American women experiencing it in her lifetime (Black et al., 2011; Burge et al, 2016). Despite extensive research on this topic and triumphs by second wave feminists, such as illegalizing marital rape and bringing attention to domestic abuse, violence against women has not abated. Too often the question is raised, “why do these women stay?,” research efforts are focused on discovering why a person would “allow” themselves to be abused. A more useful research focus might be why men abuse, what can be done to stop it, and most importantly, how the survivors can be rehabilitated post-trauma. This paper, a literature review with observational analysis from working with a nonprofit that offers creative opportunities within women’s shelters, will address how perceived self-efficacy may be increased through art therapy and skill training to not only combat the symptoms of depression and PTSD that are common in survivors of domestic violence (Lambert, Benight, Wong & Johnson, 2013), but perhaps to help rebuild the confidence that was damaged during the prolonged trauma.

The most common theory investigating domestic violence (DV) is the Cycle of Violence Theory by Walker (1979). Walker explains that the cycle has three phases, the first is tension-building, minor abuses may occur, but the survivor adjusts their actions to keep their abuser content. The second phase, the violent episode, is marked by an outburst of violence, a

loss of control on the abuser's part that results in serious physical or emotional damage. The final phase is remorse, also known as the honeymoon phase, in this stage the abuser apologizes and becomes very loving. However, it is almost certain that tensions will build again repeating the cycle (Walter, 1979).

While Walter's theory is still well respected, it does not go into the mental state of the person being abused. An updated, perhaps more detailed, model is the Violence Wheel (see Appendix A). This model considers multiple strategies abusers employ and illustrates how the entire system revolves around power and control (Domestic Violence Organization, 2015). Economic and emotional dependency can make leaving more complicated, but one must be careful to avoid victim blaming rhetoric when investigating these factors. Many survivors are aware that their situation is dangerous, yet, they perceive the benefits of staying as outweighing the potential harm of leaving (Borenstein, 2006). The National Coalition for the Homeless states that up to 70% of homeless individuals report violence as either being the cause of their homelessness or a prevalent factor in it (Swick, 2008). A United States homicide report states that 15.9 percent of all homicides in 2002 were between intimate partners. Eighty-one percent of those victims were wives killed by their husbands, for those killed by an unmarried partner, 71% were female (Chanmugam, 2014). Seventy percent of women killed by an intimate partner are killed when they are trying to leave or after they have left (Stand!, 2016). Many factors go into whether or not leaving seems "worth it." The survivor's relationship to their family plays a role, if or if not they have children, whether or not they have access to services, how safe they feel,

whether or not they have an opportunity to leave (Bahool et al., 2015); these are all crucial, external factors.

While DV is commonly thought of as physical or emotional abuse, economic abuse can be equally painful. Economic abuse can be characterized by economic exploitation, financially controlling behaviors, employment sabotage, preventing the individual from working, disrupting his/her work day, intentionally damaging his/her credit score, spending money that was allocated for bills, and other forms of financial control/sabotage (Postmus, Hetling & Hoge, 2015). One survivor, Alice (names changed), shared that each time she tried to apply to school, her husband took her applications promising that he would take care of her. By keeping her from acquiring the education that would qualify her for better paying jobs, he ensured that she was financially dependent on him. This made leaving much more difficult. Survivors of DV are at increased risk for financial hardship. Many women, upon leaving their abuser, find themselves on welfare. As such, there are efforts by nonprofits to increase fiscal competency. Postmus, Hetling, and Hoge (2015) found that survivors of DV who received a financial education course regained financial independence much quicker than a control group. Other nonprofits, such as Beads for Life employ survivors as artisans to help them regain financial control that way.

Emotional dependency is less easily defined than physical or financial abuse. Emotionally dependent individuals are reliant on others for emotional security and stability; they often do not have a strong sense of self and use external validation to fill this deficit (Hoogstad, 2008). The nature of intimate partner violence often results in the development of a negative self-concept, therefore increasing the likelihood of emotional dependence (Kachadourian et al.,

2013). Art therapy, however, may be able to improve self-concept. Hacking, Secker, Spandler, Kent & Shenton (2008), found that art therapy led to increased self-confidence, socialization, and self-esteem. In my weeks as an assistant workshop facilitator at here there and EVERYwhere (htE), I saw participants get progressively more confident in themselves, or at least in their artistic ability. The first few weeks the participants asked the volunteers, including myself, our opinion and advice on most every detail of their projects. By the last few weeks, however, they were almost entirely self-sufficient only asking for help in finding a materials and/or tools.

Art therapy has also been shown to counteract symptoms of PTSD (Mandić-Gajić & Špirić, 2016). The most prevalent forms of trauma in U.S. adults include: physical or sexual assault (or witnessing it), witnessing violent death or injury to a loved one, and natural disasters (Kip et al., 2015). PTSD may present in the form of avoidance symptoms, negative affect, disturbing and/or repetitive cognitions, and increased arousal and/or reactivity (Kip et al., 2015). I witnessed both avoidance symptoms while working with htE. Although we did not deeply discuss the survivor's trauma, in the "lady talk" around the craft table there was much conversation about "quitting men". Some women spoke of focusing on friends and family, other spoke about starting a romantic relationship with a woman, and a few spoke about scouring for one of the "few good men." One thing was for certain, there was definitely a communal attitude of male avoidance to protect oneself from a recurrence. There were also a couple instances of increased reactivity when someone got a text from their abuser, or when one woman had to step out during the premiere of our film because it was "too soon" to see abusive imagery.

Art therapy may help individuals with PTSD to express their trauma in a less threatening way, while simultaneously decreasing anxiety, building confidence and in group settings, community (Mandić-Gajić & Špirić, 2016). The element of focus “cultivates acceptance, loving kindness, and compassion toward self and others, accesses creativity, aligns one with their authentic self, reduces stress, improves decision-making, and serves as an entry into spiritual dimensions of living” (Rapport, 2009). The more intricate activities such as ring carving and wire work involved a tremendous amount of focus. The benefits were tangible for myself and for the survivors. One week we asked the women to write on a piece of paper what they get from our workshops. The words “peace” and “relaxation” were the most frequent, but also included was “fun” and “therapeutic”.

Art therapy is based in Freudian theory, but it goes much deeper than bringing the unconscious forward; art therapy is about expression and symbolism (Howie, Prasad & Kristel, 2013). For individuals who have difficulty expressing themselves verbally, talk therapy can be limiting. With creative therapies, clients are given the opportunity to be heard in another way, where they may feel more comfortable expressing their experiences, whether it be writing, drawing, sculpting, or some other form of artistic expression (Howie, Prasad & Kristel, 2013). The most important factor in successful art therapy is having someone who is properly trained to listen to these alternative forms of communication. At htE we create a safe place for expression, but we do not initiate conversations, nor do we attempt to interpret the art of the survivors who attend our workshops. Even so, there are moments of intimacy, bonding, and a desire to be understood. Upon driving Tori home from htE’s field trip to Six Flags, I learned that she was had

given up finishing her Master's in Business for her husband who, as it turned out, was still married to his first wife. This man lied to her, manipulated her, and fought tooth and nail to make sure he did not pay child support to their daughter, and yet she admitted to still loving him. "This must mean I am so stupid, right?," she asked me. These women are suffering not only because of their abusers, but because of society. Shame, stigma, and victim-blaming are woven into the cultural reaction to DV, and this has to change.

htE produced a short film that documented Alice's story. In eight minutes, this film perfectly captures the shame that comes with DV. Most women leave seven times before they leave forever (Stand!, 2016). The "failure" to leave and stay gone is often perceived as weakness, but trying to leave at all takes great courage, especially in this nation where the odds are not in the survivors favor. America needs to make changes. As scientists we must search for what is going wrong in the upbringing of our men to encourage them to harm women. As legislators we need to reform laws to make them more protective of survivors. On a social level we need to discourage victim-blaming and rape culture. Intimate partner violence is dehumanizing. The effects can be seen in the children who witness it. I did not work in the children's room often, but when I did I saw a three year old girl choking another child. When we premiered the short film and Alice's character was slapped by her husband a child in the audience said "that's like what daddy does." We cannot have our children learning that intimate partner violence is normal or acceptable.

Our workshops run in twelve week cycles and move from shelter to shelter. This last cycle was at a family shelter in Brooklyn. The nature of this shelter made it difficult to get to

know the participants on a personal level; turnover was very high. Nonetheless, from the first week it became clear that the participants were grateful for some “me time.” Each week we would provide child care. Some participants utilized that service and did not attend the workshop, while others brought their child into the adult activity room. The wants and needs differed from person to person, but we did our best to accommodate everyone. The activities in the workshop vary from week to week, with one of the goals being to learn new creative skills. The first few weeks involved fabric painting and weaving coasters. As the weeks went by the workshops became more advanced with some of the later classes studying jewelry making and more complicated sewing techniques.

There was little socialization in the early weeks of the creative workshops. Participants regularly got up to get a snack or check on their child, but in the later weeks they began to open up. They talked more among themselves and to the volunteers, became more invested in their projects, and even began brainstorming projects they could do on their own. Cat told me that she used to make tutus, but stopped when her life became overwhelming, but that she thinks “she’d like to get back into it.” Another participant, Angie thanked us for the “few hours peace” she enjoys when coming to our workshops. Although none of the volunteers are yet licensed therapists, one can observe the confidence building that occurred over this twelve week workshop. Cat started bringing her speakers to share her favorite music with the class, Megan used the sewing machine to make her own Halloween costume, and Alyssa decided she wanted to start selling the tie-dye shirts she made. Often the improved confidence was limited to their ability to wire-wrap an earring or tie a square knot, nonetheless it is a step in a positive direction.

The success of these workshops may be partially attributed to flow. Flow state is characterized by challenge, the merging of actions and awareness, a goal, concentration, a sense of control, loss of self-consciousness, temporal discontinuity, and intrinsic reward (de Manzano, Theorell, Harmat & Ullén, 2010). In the last few weeks socialization would occur as people arrived, left, and during breaks, but for the majority of the workshop people sat side by side and focused on the task at hand. The workshops of htE have very little power dynamic between the participants and volunteers. During the demonstration the workshop leader will stand and explain the day's activity, but after that we all sit at the table together. If a participant asks a question we will step into the role of facilitator, otherwise we are merely fellow craftsman. I observed many aspects of flow during the workshops at the shelter. When the facilitator called for clean up almost every week the response was "already?" There was a clear distortion of the temporal experience. There were also instances of intrinsic reward. One participant said to me, "I know this doesn't look good, but I really enjoyed making it, so now I kinda like it." Flow has been repeatedly linked to increased life satisfaction as well as positive physiological effects (de Manzano, Theorell, Harmat & Ullén, 2010).

It was extremely rewarding to watch participants self talk evolve from "I can't" to "I can and then some." In the next to last workshop I had a conversation with a few participants about where to get materials and how to utilize the htE Etsy account, if participants sell crafts through our Etsy they receive 100% of the profits. I cannot speak on behalf of other facets of these women's lives, but as far as their confidence in their ability to make hand-made goods, there was a clear increase in confidence and efficacy. I hope these benefits permeated into other aspects of

their lives. At our showcase event at White Box Gallery, Megan's tie-dye tank top sold for \$25, when I told her she was so excited, "I can't believe someone liked it enough to pay money for it!" This very well might have been the best part of the entire experience.

Intimate partner violence is harmful to the mental health of its survivors. The trauma is unique to each situation and often multi-faceted. Abuse can be emotional, physical, financial, even spiritual. The effects, both psychological and situational can last forever. Survivors frequently exhibit symptoms of depression, anxiety, and PTSD (Kip et al., 2015). Survivors are also at an increased risk for government dependence, homelessness, and further abuse (Abrahams, 2007). Child custody battles, litigation battles, and victim-blaming can further the complicated nature of these situations (Abrahams, 2007). The Violence Wheel, as well as long-term manipulation, often chips away at the self-image of a survivor. One survivor explained that while the physical abuse is hard, the psychological abuse is much worse. Not only does one have the pain that comes directly from the abuse, the individual often also faces internalized feelings of shame. She said that she did not want to tell her mother or her friends, and that "sometimes she felt it was better to die." Art therapy has been shown to have counteract these negative symptoms and increase confidence and self-efficacy (Brooke, 2008). The htE volunteers strive to create a safe space for survivors of domestic violence to express themselves creatively; the effects have been amazing. The social aspect of the group setting as well as the mental distraction concentrating on an art project grew the confidence of the participants. I believe that art may be the voice that domestic violence survivors need after being put down and silenced for so long.

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Appendix A



DOMESTIC ABUSE INTERVENTION PROJECT

202 East Superior Street
Duluth, Minnesota 55802
218-722-2781
www.duluth-model.org