

For abused women, leaving is a complex and confusing process

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Nothing could be easier than walking out the door, right? According to a new University of Illinois journal article, an abused woman actually goes through a five-step process of leaving that can be complicated at every stage by boundary ambiguity.

"When a woman is disengaging from a relationship, she is often unclear about her family's boundaries. Is her partner in or out of her life? A woman's spouse may be physically in the home but psychologically unavailable. He's not caring for the kids or being a loving partner.

"Or she may have physically left him but still be psychologically connected. She misses him, and for the sake of her children, she'd like for her family to be together again," said Jennifer Hardesty, a U of I assistant professor of human and community development.

"We could see this struggle clearly in the pictures women drew of their families at different points in the process of leaving. It's a confusing time. The boundaries are ambiguous," she said.

"It's not unlike the experience of having a child leave for college," she noted. "Your child isn't living at home, but you're still very connected to them emotionally. Yet, when they come home for visits, they may pay little attention to you while they make the rounds of their friends. It's always hard to figure out what the new boundaries are as you move into a new stage of life."

The article describes doctoral candidate Lyndal Khaw's dissertation work, unique in integrating boundary ambiguity into Prochaska and DiClemente's Stages of Change model. Khaw has applied the model to 25 abused women from varied backgrounds, identifying boundary ambiguity within the five stages of the process of leaving.

"In the first two stages, women begin to disconnect emotionally from their relationships. You hear them say things like, I started not to care for him anymore," Khaw said

Stage 3 is often marked by a pileup of abusive episodes and noticeable effects of the violence on their children. "Women make preparations to leave, such as finding a place to stay or secretly saving up money. This stage is important for women as they switch from thinking about leaving to actually doing something about it," she said.

"Then, at Stage 4, when women take action, we see a lot of what we call back and forth because when women leave, the emotions often come back. They need clarity. They want to be physically and emotionally connected again," said Hardesty.

The last stage, maintenance, is achieved when women have been gone for six months or more. "But even then they may have boundary ambiguity if their ex-spouse won't let them go. With continued contact through court-ordered child visitation, the potential for ongoing abuse remains as well as continued confusion over the abuser's role in the woman's life," she said.

In the past, Khaw and Hardesty have used the model to focus on what individual women are going through. But applying boundary ambiguity to the model gives a more complete picture of the process.

"Leaving a relationship is much more complex than just deciding to

change, and it involves more than a woman's prioritizing her safety. Other actors are involved. The abuser makes decisions that affect a woman's movement through the stages. And children can be a powerful influence in motivating a woman to get out of a relationship and in pulling her back in," Hardesty said.

It's important for social work professionals and frustrated family and friends to understand the process of leaving, Hardesty said.

"Often shelter workers focus on safety and tangible needs such as a job and housing. They don't help women disentangle themselves emotionally. But it's hard for women to get out of the situation if they haven't resolved these relationship issues.

"Discouraged friends and family members have to learn to view leaving as a process and realize that there's little they can say to speed it along. It's important for them to reinforce the risks the woman is facing by asking such questions as 'Has he become more abusive? Does he have a gun?'

"When talking to an abused friend or family member, you should always emphasize safety, but for your own sanity, you should realize that leaving is a process and she has to work her way through it herself," she said.

When women do finally achieve both physical and emotional separation, research shows that they experience fewer health problems and less depression, Hardesty said.

Lyndal Bee Lian Khaw, a U of I doctoral student, and Jennifer Hardesty are co-authors of the paper, which was published in the *Journal of Family Theory & Review*.

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