



Recovery and Psychological Well-Being of Domestic Violence Survivors: A Concurrent Triangulation Design

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Abstract

This study explores how survivors of domestic violence made sense of their recovery and how their psychological well-being improved. Three respondents claimed to have moved on from their experience of violence perpetrated by their husbands. The researcher used IPA and the Psychological Well-Being Scale for triangulation. Respondent 1 recovered by finding a meaningful life, forgiving, and letting go. Respondent 2 recovered by working hard and gaining courage. Respondent 3 recovered by gaining freedom and expanding her perspective in life. They were able to let go of their past, open themselves to new experiences, and love again. Their psychological well-being was high, they were in positive relations and had personal growth.

In conducting counseling or psychotherapy among survivors of violence, applying positive psychotherapy is suggested to help survivors discover the meaning of breaking the cycle of violence, and emphasize their capability to change their lives to become better. Tools and techniques of other psychotherapies, including physical exercises, mindfulness, bibliotherapy, enhancing spirituality, forgiving, dealing with unfinished business, self-care, and gaining economic stability, may be introduced during therapy to help them recover and attain high psychological well-being.

Keywords: Survivors of domestic violence, recovery, psychological well-being.

Introduction

Stories from survivors of domestic violence describe both physical abuse and psychological stress from endless silent fights. Memories of their abuse remain in the minds of survivors and make it difficult to live happily. However, coming out as a survivor shows that they realize that there is a better life ahead of them. Domestic violence is real, and it can happen to anyone regardless of ethnicity, race, age, religion, civil status, socioeconomic class, and sexual orientation. Almost 27% of women aged 15-49 years reported that they experienced physical and/or sexual violence perpetrated by their intimate partner (World Health Organization, 2024). Women's experience of violence in the Philippines decreased in 2022 compared to the data in 2017, based on the 2022 National Demographic and Health Survey (NHDS) conducted by the Philippine Statistics Authority (Balita, 2024). But this data only reflects reported cases. The same survey found that some of the women never sought help from authorities nor told anyone about the violence.

Any form of domestic violence leaves a negative impact on the physical, psychological, sexual, and social functioning of women. It increases the risk of mental health problems and reduces satisfaction with life and level of healthiness (Bo & Yating, 2023).

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Cheng and Lo (2019) showed that injury, fear, and poor mental health occur following long-term domestic violence. Other victims of violence may even develop mental illness including anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, suicidal attempts, and substance abuse disorder (Sharma 2021; Willmer, 2021).

Despite the experience of violence and its negative impact, women may reach their maximum tolerance and decide to break free from the cycle of violence. There is minimal research on the recovery of survivors of violence (Flasch et al., 2015; Willmer, 2021) and there is a lack of information on how these survivors move on with their life after leaving the violent relationship (Anderson et al., 2012). This study presented how some survivors made sense of their recovery from violence and how their psychological well-being improved.

Method

Research Design

The research technique used in the study is a mixed method or a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Specifically, concurrent triangulation was utilized to compare findings from qualitative and quantitative data sources. Concurrent triangulation is a mixed method design that collects qualitative and quantitative data at the same time and analyzes the data separately, integrating it at the interpretation stage (Creswell, 2014). The qualitative data gathered from the interviews was used to confirm and corroborate the findings of the quantitative data on psychological well-being.

For the qualitative technique, the study utilized a phenomenological qualitative research approach. Phenomenology is the study of individual's daily experiences and a conscious description of the essence of these experiences (Creswell, 2007). This method is most appropriate to this study because it aims to understand the lived experiences of domestic violence survivors from when they left the marriage and recovered from the violence.

Participants

Three female respondents were successfully recruited through snowball and convenience sampling. The criteria included a survivor of violence perpetrated by their legal husband and a subjective claim that they have moved on from the violence. The sample size for phenomenological studies is three up to ten (Creswell, 1998 & 2002 as mentioned by Roy et al., 2015; and Creswell, 2013 as cited by Guetterman, 2015).

Respondent 1 experienced psychological violence (verbal abuse, abandonment, and infidelity). Respondent 2 experienced physical violence (threatened with a knife), sexual (forcing the wife and mistress/lover to live in the conjugal home, forcing sexual activity), psychological (witnessing physical abuse of their children) and economic violence (controlling money and damaging property). Respondent 3 experienced psychological (mental suffering from controlling her activities, fear of imminent harm and damage to property) and economic violence (destroying household property). The definition of violence in his study was based on the Philippine Republic Act 9262 which is the act legally defining violence against women and their children.

Instruments

The instruments used in the study were a one-on-one interview and the 42-item version of the Psychological Well-being Scale (PWBS) by Carol Ryff (1989). The PWBS is one of the most widely used survey instruments to measure positive aspects of psychological functioning along six theoretically-motivated dimensions: independence and self-determination (autonomy); having satisfying, high-quality relationships (positive relations with others); the ability to manage one's life (environmental mastery); being open to new

experiences (personal growth); believing that one's life is meaningful (purpose in life); and a positive attitude towards oneself and one's past life (self-acceptance). The scale is openly published and is free to use. Also, its reliability and validity are already proven as it has been extensively used in a variety of samples and settings (Abbott et al., 2009).

Procedures

The Researcher approached the participants and asked if they were willing to be part of the research. One of the participants was a previous client of the Researcher. The other two were recruited through snowball sampling. After the participants verbally agreed to be part of the research, they were scheduled for an interview and the informed consent was explained to them. The Psychological Well-being Scale (PWBS) was administered to them during the first interview schedule. The second interview schedule included the interpretation and discussion of their PWBS score, validation of their answers during the first interview, and follow-up questioning.

The co-workers of Respondents 2 and 3 were also interviewed regarding the attitude of the respondents and observed changes in their behavior. The psychologist who handled R1's psychological assessment following their adoption process was also interviewed.

The interview transcripts were read, re-read and initial codes were written. After re-reading and analyzing the meanings of the responses, open coding and axial coding were done until selective or final codes emerged. The third meeting with the respondents included validation of the meanings and themes created by the Researcher.

To establish the trustworthiness of the research, member checking through repeated interviews and verification of the responses, meanings of responses, and themes were carried out. The themes were also discussed with the co-counselor of the Researcher. Triangulation was done because multiple sources of data were collected through interviews from the participant, from the psychologist of R1, and from the co-workers of R1 and R2, and from the administered Psychological Well-Being Scale.

All researchers believe that women are capable of breaking the cycle of violence and achieving a better life. One of the researchers reflected personal reflexivity in this research as she had been conducting psychological assessments and evaluations of victims and survivors of domestic violence since 2007. She had also previously conducted a study on the cycle of domestic violence for her master's degree thesis in 2011.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data gathered from the Psychological Well-Being Scale was used for triangulation purposes and was not subjected to statistical analysis. The PWBS was scored and interpreted using the standard interpretation guide provided by Ryff (1989).

The treatment for the qualitative data adopted the steps suggested by Spiers & Smith (2019). This involved multiple readings of the interview transcripts and notetaking. The Researcher read the interview transcript several times, observed the reactions of the participants, and noted significant data that were not included during the interview. The missing data were verified during the follow-up interviews and member checking.

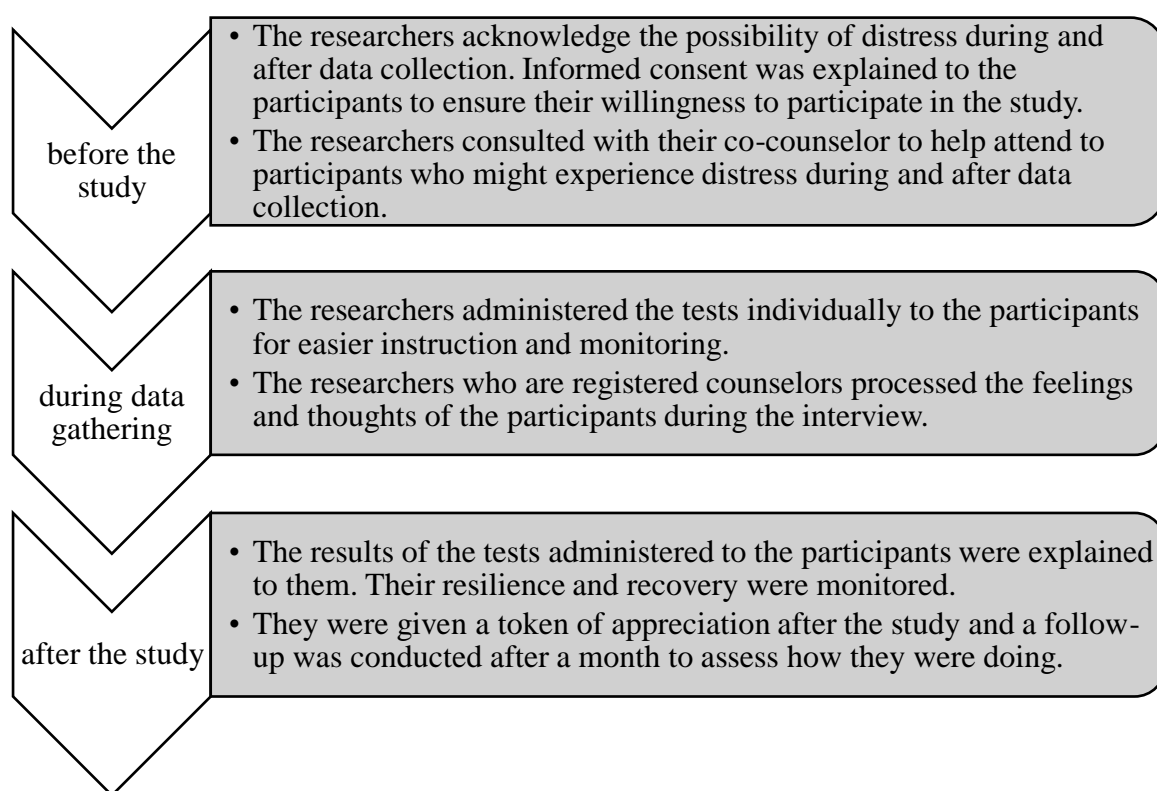
The second step was transforming these notes into emergent themes. The Researcher integrated any new information gathered and re-read the transcripts. Then, the responses were coded. The researcher continued working on transforming the initial codes into themes. The thematic analysis of each participant is referred to as an *idiographic* approach, a detailed focus on a person's subjective lived experience of a particular topic prior to generalizing (Love et al., 2020). The final themes were again verified by the participants and peer-reviewed by the co-guidance counselor of the Researcher.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers first asked for the participants' willingness to be included in the study and the data gathering procedures were explained to them. With their agreement, they were asked to sign the consent form. The confidentiality of the participants and the interview details was emphasized. The interviews and test administration were conducted in the guidance office to ensure confidentiality, safety, and comfort. The interview transcripts and consent forms were kept in a locked cabinet and were shredded after the study.

During the interviews, a counselor was on standby to attend to participants who might break down. The results of the study were shared to the participants and they were given a token in gratitude for their participation. The figure below shows the distress protocol before, during, and after the study.

Figure 1 *Distress protocol of the study*



Results

Qualitative Results

The last step in analyzing data in an interpretative phenomenological approach is writing a narrative account of the study. Each respondent was attended to ideographically before the comparative analysis. The result aims to understand how the survivors made sense of their recovery from domestic violence. The following were the themes, extracts from the interviews, and analytic or interpretative comments from the Researcher. The italics are the verbatim responses of the respondents.

Respondent 1 (R1)

Theme 1: Forgiving and letting go: Forgiveness is sometimes viewed as letting go of anger that has been harbored over some time (Leon, 2008). After deciding to leave the marriage, R1

wanted to unload the heavy emotional baggage that she was carrying. She felt tired and confused and she wanted to find peace. Looking back, she could not believe that she bravely walked alone at dawn to attend morning prayers. The morning prayers gave her insights that made her realize why her marriage turned out to be broken. She had important realizations on forgiving, the purpose of living, and letting go that relieved her suffering. She narrated:

“after I left our conjugal house, I asked permission from my mother to go to the city. I worked as a nanny to my niece while I was waiting for my application abroad. Every 5:00 in the morning I walk from my boarding house to the city center to attend the early morning prayer of Free Believers. I do not know why I was so brave to walk very early in the morning and walk back home again. It is there where I expressed my problem regarding my marriage and I realized that God has a purpose in everything. It was helpful because I felt relieved. I realized that if you do not forgive, you will suffer that is why learn to let go.”

She even read a book on letting go that made her realize that talking about her experience will help her let go and forget. Reading an inspirational book when sorrowful may facilitate recovery and psychological well-being. Also, instead of keeping the problem to herself, she openly shared it with other churchgoers. The church is a quiet place where she feels safe, confident, and calm. The bible sharing of pastors have insights that left a positive impact on her. She made conscious efforts to attend morning prayers for five months and to read a book on letting go to cope with the hatred and anger that she had harbored for some time. Her reading left a positive impact on R1. She said,

I have read a book on letting go and it says that to forget a thing, the more you talk about it. I did it and by the time I kept on repeating it, I started to forget about it. Letting go is the same as forgetting. It goes away on its own and it makes us feel light.

Theme 2: Finding a meaningful life: A meaningful life means a lifetime that is of value and worth. After leaving the marriage, R1 felt lost. She felt that her life had no meaning, direction, or purpose. It was easy for her to do as she pleased and find where she is needed. While in the city, she heard that her mother was sick, so she had to return to the province. She then started to work in the hospital on a job-order basis. She was busy at work and was carefree.

She felt good that she had parents and siblings to go home to but felt lonely because they had their families and lives to attend to. She has nieces and nephews that distract her and yet she wants to feel worthy and to have greater purpose in life. She narrated,

“when my mother got sick, I had to go home then I started working at the hospital. I concentrated at work but I still felt that my life has no direction. I was easy go lucky my life seems to have no purpose. I do not know where to place myself. I feel that my life has no direction. It feels good to have parents and siblings to go home to but it feels different if you have a husband to go home to. Come what may. No concentration. Happy go lucky. I tell myself that it's good that I have siblings, nephews and nieces who are distracting my daily routine. But as to my personal life, nothing is serious to think. I am still alone.”

When she met her current husband, she felt that he is the missing piece in her life. She felt complete. She had someone whom she can share her life with, and a family of her own. Finding the missing piece is unconsciously looking for an unknown thing that when found

out brings joy and a sense of accomplishment (Bunton, 2003). Her life became more meaningful and committed to something that is more important than work. Fatherless at the age of two, she wanted a man whom she can rely on. She said,

when I got married again, I already have a partner to go home to and I have an obligation. I processed the nullity of my marriage and it was granted.

Because she was able to let go, to forgive, and to open herself to love again, she is now happy, contented, satisfied, and feeling accomplished. She concluded,

I am happy and contented with my husband and child. I am not asking for more. I am contented with simple but happy. My husband is kind.

Respondent 2 (R2)

Theme 1: Gaining freedom and courage: Freedom is being able to plan and execute what one wants to do in life without being controlled and ridiculed. Being courageous means having confidence to fight for what someone believes is right for the family. The vicious cycle of violence made R2 feel like she is trapped. She was not able to focus on making a living for the family. However, moving out from the cycle of violence was a huge step for her. It was her choice to make herself free from the bondage of violence. It was her courageous move to defend herself and her children before they die of violence. Repetitive cycles of violence are not enough to leave the marriage for a lot of victims. It needs tons of mental toughness to make it happen.

Leaving her husband means she predicted that her husband can kill her and her children. It means that she cannot change her husband no matter how hard she works just to fulfill his desires and disregard his cruelties. It also means she finally sees the value of herself. She understood that life is more than being a punching bag or a sex object. Her life is not meant to work so hard just to give in to her husband's needs.

She gave herself and opportunity to focus on herself and her children, to be at peace and to think of other things rather than preoccupied by chaos that awaits her at home. Being free also means being safe and secure. Leaving her husband means relocating herself and her children from an unsecure environment to a safe and secure one. She said,

when I left him, I started to move on. I felt I was released. I felt good because I am no longer disturbed. I was able to concentrate at work for my children.

The absence of her parents to guide her when she was growing up and the experience of violence gave her courage to face life. Generally, people who experienced sufferings are forced to mature at an early age. The struggles growing up without her parents and her sufferings in marriage gave her power instead of weakness. Her locus of control was external because instead of blaming her husband, she attributed her experience of violence and process of recovery to a Higher Being. She narrated,

I experienced many forms of violence but I think these are trials that God gave to me. He is the one who also gave me guide on how to overcome it. I was able to handle all. This experience made me more mature because I have no parents to guide me. I also became braver.

At present, she is already in control of her life. She was able improve her work, to take charge of her children and to connect with other people, without anyone restricting her. Her courage was her weapon in fighting her other trials in life. She concluded,

now I can manage my life. I am given the courage to face all my problems in life. I am not pathetic. I am not poor.

Theme 2: Working hard: Working hard literally means gaining financial stability and attaining economic empowerment thru employment, or any job skills. R2 is the sole bread winner and was earning a minimum wage. After leaving her husband, she worked so hard only for herself and for her children. She no longer has to financially provide for her husband's vices. Her work and her children are two of the most important things in her life so she has to save both. Rather than working with a heavy heart, she worked with contentment and joy because of her children. Rather than working upset and disturbed, she worked with inspiration. It gave her the feeling of accomplishment that she was able to provide her children's needs. She said,

I just worked to be able to feed my children. Work was what I always looked for because my husband does not support us.

She never bothered to ask help from other people or agencies because she sees it as waste of time and money. She said,

I had no time to ask for help. It is a waste of time and money because I was preoccupied with work so that I have can feed my children.

She was used to making decisions on her own because of the absence of her parents while she was growing up. Hence, she did not see the need of asking for help. Instead, she diverted her attention and channeled her energy to earning money rather than spending. Her work served as a shock absorber and unloading station for her emotional baggage and wasteful mental thoughts but it served a good purpose.

Respondent 3 (R3)

Theme 1: Gaining freedom and confidence: Ending the cycle of violence entailed standing firm with the decision to be able to attain freedom. Separating from her husband means ending her confinement in a house whom she perceived that can possibly kill her. It means starting a new, balanced and better social, family and career life. Separating from her husband was the most effective way she thought of to be in control of her life and to be stable. She said,

I told myself that I do not like anymore. I don't want to go back to the same toxic relationship. I want out. It made me realize that, I will not let my life revolve around him only.

R3 was engulfed with fear but she was persistent to go back to her normal routine and life. She gradually trained and mentally conditioned herself to do things on her own until she gained confidence.

I still have fear being alone going to the market. I need a companion in going to the market until I learned to be alone again. I told myself that there is no reason for me to be like this. I slowly gained confidence again and told to myself that I can do this.

R3 felt lost and was fearful; she limited her movements and was scared to take any form of control. When her petition for nullity of marriage was granted, she rejoiced because she finally felt like a human being with the intellect to make decisions on her own, to relax, to travel, and to go to church. She regained her old self who was free-spirited and confident. She narrated,

because we separated, nobody monitors me already. I was able to relax again. I am free to do what I want to do. Anytime, I can go to the city to visit my family. His perception before was when I visit my family, they brainwash me. I became church goer again because before, he does not want to go to mass. My petition for nullity of marriage was granted in 2014. After that, I felt at peace and okay. I was relieved. The fear that was controlling me was gone. I do not have a daily monitor.

At present, she is enjoying her freedom. She feel relieved, at peace, good, and happy with her life now, though she regrets not having a child.

Theme 2: Thinking expansively: Thinking expansively means widening of perspective and levelling up of problem-solving skills. While in the cycle of violence, R3 ignored the negative comments of other people regarding her husband. She was protecting her pride for not listening to them. She was preoccupied with confusing thoughts that is why she kept numb and deaf of other people's advice and comments. She was clouded by negativities that affected how she related with other people but at present, she is more sociable and expressive. Her coworker observed,

her work before was always double checked. She was so quiet. She had anger outburst. She had no initiative during meetings." She also said, *"now I can listen to what other people say like I am open to suggestions. I can voice out my opinions.*

In the process of moving on, she realized that opening up and sharing her story of violence was helpful to others and to her. Similar to R1, she was able to let go by expressing her story of violence to others. She stated,

I can tell my story of violence openly, it's up to them to listen or not. There are really people asking me what I did.

She initially depended on her family for emotional support. She consulted a lawyer and a psychologist because no matter how much she tried to keep her marital problem, it eventually came out because of the toll that it created to her. She recognized that she needed help. She acknowledged that she cannot solve her problems alone. She needed other people to help her recover and recuperate.

I kept my problem with myself. I never told to anyone but others are noticing it because of my appearance. I told my story to a lawyer and I decided to file for annulment. I sought the help of a psychologist for the psychological incapacity. I stayed in the city with my parents and siblings because I am the only one who is staying here.

Nowadays, she is considering a change in her career and migrating locally. One observation of her colleague was that she was more open to attending seminars that are conducted out of the province, unlike the previous years that she never joined one. Planning to modify some aspects of her life means that she wants to explore and experience new things and to grow even better as person.

Quantitative Results

Table 1

Psychological Well-Being of Respondent 1

Dimension	Qualitative interpretation		
	High	Average	Low
Autonomy			X
Environmental mastery	X		
Personal Growth	X		
Positive relations with others	X		
Purpose in Life	X		
Self-Acceptance	X		

R1 scored high on environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. This means that tends to be very good in managing her life, maintaining warm and satisfying relationship with other people, and improving herself and attaining her full potential. She also tends to believe that her life is meaningful and has a sense of direction. She has a positive attitude towards herself and her negative experiences in life. On the other hand, R1 scored low in autonomy because she is anxious of being judged by other people. she is bothered by the expectations and evaluations of other people on how she would parent her adoptive daughter.

Table 2

Psychological Well-Being of Respondent 2

Dimension	Qualitative interpretation		
	High	Average	Low
Autonomy		X	
Environmental mastery		X	
Personal Growth	X		
Positive relations with others	X		
Purpose in Life		X	
Self-Acceptance		X	

R2 obtained high scores in personal growth and positive relations. This indicates that she highly perceives herself growing, opening to new experiences, and realizing her full potential. Her high score in positive relations with others mean that she has strong feelings of empathy and affection for other people, and she is able to form deeper friendship and more love. For her average scores, it means that she has adequate internal locus of control, maturity, sense of direction in life, and acceptance of past and present self.

Table 3*Psychological Well-Being of Respondent 3*

Dimension	Qualitative interpretation		
	High	Average	Low
Autonomy	X		
Environmental mastery		X	
Personal Growth	X		
Positive relations with others	X		
Purpose in Life	X		
Self-Acceptance	X		

Respondent 3 scored high in autonomy, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. This means that she tends to have a high ability to resist social pressures, to be open to new experiences, and to be concerned about the welfare of others. Further, she felt a sense of direction in her life, and she accepts multiple aspects of herself, including her past. Her average score in environmental mastery means that she is good at managing her life in general.

Discussion

This section will discuss the integration of the results of qualitative and quantitative data. The recovery and improvement of their psychological well-being were achieved externally and internally. External was the help of their families, pastors, lawyers, and psychologists. Internal was their firm decision of leaving the perpetrator, ability to transcend their experience of violence, determination, and conscious efforts to develop a better self through self-help techniques including going to church, praying, reading letting-go books, and getting employed.

R1 was able to forgive and let go of her hatred. She transformed her life from feeling lost and directionless to a meaningful one filled with happiness and satisfaction. This confirms her high score in purpose in life in the PWBS. She found a sense of direction and realized the meaning of her life after leaving a toxic marriage. Her high scores personal growth, positive relations with others, and self-acceptance in the PWBS implies that she accepted her past, and she is open to new experiences for self-development. She learned many things in the process of recovering that changed her perspectives in life and gave her life a sense of direction.

She was able to learn to trust and build positive relationships with other people. She opened herself to love and remarry. Having a family is a responsibility, but it is the happiness, contentment, and meaning of life for R1. Her low score in autonomy in the PWS is related to her intense anxiety about the expectations and evaluations of others on how she will raise her adoptive daughter. She mentioned that one of her fears is that her adoptive daughter might be unable to finish her studies. Other people might think that she did not do anything good for herself.

R2 evolved from being weak to being strong to face life challenges. She did not score low in any of the PWS because of her strong will that she can manage her life. She sees herself as worthy and able to manage her life. There were no signs of depression noted from her. Employment and financial stability seemed to be an effective antidote to her turmoil although it did not necessarily eradicate it. Her employment was one of the sources of her sense of independence, accomplishment, contentment, and happiness because she can provide the basic needs of her children. Her high score in personal growth in the PWBS confirms that she realized that she gained courage and the potential to fight for herself and her children.

She faced her problem alone and did not seek help from anyone because she claimed that she would rather earn for living.

R3 also evolved from being fearful to becoming fully confident to be alone again. She embraced and enjoyed her freedom in directing her life. She made decisions on her own, planned for herself, moved out of her comfort zone, and expanded her experiences. She travels to renew her bond with her family, upgrades herself professionally, and make plans for her future. These corroborates with her high scores in purpose in life, positive relations with others, personal growth, and autonomy scales in the PWBS. At present, she can execute her plans including travelling, going to a seminar out of the province, or changing career because she is already independent, and nobody is controlling her. She also feels that her present life is more meaningful because of her freedom. Hence, she can already decide on her own, care about other people's welfare, and more open to changes. She accepted that she is a survivor of violence and recognized that she is not perfect.

All the respondents have high psychological well-being in terms of positive relations and personal growth. They were able to let go of their past, to open themselves to new experiences, and to love again. R1 let go of her first marriage, found a responsible and patient husband, adopted a child, and had a family that made her life meaningful and complete. R2 gained freedom and courage to start a new life with her children and newfound partner. Her work gave her financial stability and contentment in life. R3 did not remarry, but she openly expressed that she is not closing her doors to love again.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Leaving a toxic relationship and being free from violence were the first steps to recovery and attaining high psychological wellbeing. The second step was navigating their "single life" alone while trying to cope with the negative impact violence. Asking help from other people or professionals may also help in their recovery and well-being. On the road to recovery, they widened their perspective, explored what they wanted in life, and learned countless insights that kept them afloat, and eventually became incorporated in their lives. Being able to forgive and to let go, to find meaning in life, to expand one's perspective, to have freedom, confidence, and courage are a few of the characteristics of someone who recovered from domestic violence.

The respondents generally have recovered and found meaning from their experience of abuse. The recovery process and improvement of psychological well-being are not perfect and permanent. It is fluctuating because of the dynamism of human experiences. While recovering from the violence, other problems may arise that will affect a person's stability. The survivors may have overcome the negative impacts of violence, but new problems may arise that will affect their psychological well-being.

Further, a person may have high psychological well-being in some dimensions but not in all because there are always challenges or problems encountered in life. Having high psychological well-being does not mean that everything is fine. It only means that they can manage their difficulties and choose to grow, to see the positive side of life, and to love every day.

In conducting counseling or psychotherapy to survivors of violence, allow and encourage them to discover the meaning of breaking the cycle of violence and emphasize their capability to change their lives to become better. This will possibly facilitate their recovery and improve their psychological well-being. However, highlight also that there is no perfect psychological well-being because life is dynamic.

Forgiveness, walking, reading inspirational books, enhancing spirituality, dealing with unfinished business, focusing on self-improvement, and gaining financial stability may be introduced during therapy to help them recover and attain high psychological well-being. For further research, increase the number of participants to have a wider perspective of their experience. Consider gathering data from homogeneous participants like those who experienced physical violence only, economic violence only, or those with low socio-economic status only.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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