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**Wounds Women Wear:
Validating the Effects of Emotional Abuse**

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B.Ed., St. F.X. University, 1989**

**Thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Degree of Master of Education (Counselling)**

**Acadia University
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ABSTRACT

This study examines the phenomenon of emotional abuse and reviews the influences that have shaped its existence. The voices of two survivors speak to this issue through in-depth interviews. Symbolic interactionism provides the framework for understanding this phenomenon as interpreted by the participants. The prevalent question of why women stay in these relationships is explored by considering the influences of symbols, language and perspective in relation to how women are able or unable to act as agents of change. A deeper understanding of emotional abuse serves to validate its impact and to initiate processes for improving the plight of women and the wounds they wear.

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Words cannot express the thanks I offer to my family who have always supported me and particularly during the past year. Special thanks to my mother, Monica; father, Bruce; brother, Stephen; sisters, Janice and Jennifer and soul sister, Raylene. Your love and encouragement helps me to believe that no obstacle is too big and no worthy cause ever too small.

My sincere gratitude goes to my supervisor, Dr. David MacKinnon. When it was hard to remember that not all men are like those in my research, your gentle way and genuine reaction to the women's stories balanced the scale. I'm encouraged by hoping some day more men might be like you. You've been a blessing in my research.

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CHAPTER ONE: DETECTING THE WOUNDS

Introduction

A scientist conducted an experiment. She put frog number one into a pan of very hot water. The frog jumped right out. Then she placed frog number two in a pan of cool water. This frog didn't jump out. Very gradually, the scientist raised the temperature of the water. The frog gradually adapted until it boiled to death. (Anonymous, cited in Evans, 1996, p.111)

This study is not about frogs nor is it about scientific experiments. It is about emotional abuse and why women learn to adapt to dangerous environments that sometimes cost them their lives. This quote presents a graphic illustration of how a part of conditioning is adapting. Made unaware of the danger that approaches by adapting to its environment, the frog doesn't leave. It would be unlikely that anyone would even ask "why does it stay?" A question which arises here is why anyone would turn up the heat and allow this to happen. The gradual nature of this process, makes the victim unsuspecting, while the one in power may be fully aware of the consequences. I propose that society's patriarchal nature and its imbalance of power and control is responsible for "turning up the heat" on many unsuspecting victims and that it is against this backdrop that the exploration of emotional abuse should begin.

This study will examine the wounds women wear in relation to the phenomenon of emotional abuse. It will critically review the historical influences that have shaped the repression of women and society's response to this. It will examine the judgments that are often placed on women who stay in emotionally abusive relationships and explore

society's response, or lack of response, to this devastating social issue. This research will work to discover, understand, and describe the emotional abuse of women in an attempt to validate its impact. It will try to add insight to the prevalent question of why women stay in these relationships by determining if emotional abuse serves as a factor in her staying. Through validating the effects of this abuse by understanding it through the eyes of those who suffer it, we may be in a better position to assist the emotionally abused woman, or at the very least, reduce the likelihood of further isolating her through our lack of knowledge.

Personal Narrative

**"My self confidence...I'll never get it back.
A bruise goes away."**

(Survivor, cited in Bishop, 1988, p.6)

A woman once described to me how her husband would tell her that she looked like a dog and he would then proceed to make her get down on her hands and knees and act "like the dog she was." As she described this scene, I felt my stomach turn and my heart ached for her to know that she had to sit and share this with me. Perhaps she could have left that out as she was describing what life as a battered woman was like. In truth, as I have come to better understand some of the effects of emotional abuse, I doubt that she could ever leave it out because it will never leave her. "Bruises will heal" she said, "but when you are told that you are nothing long enough, you begin to believe it."

I have never been physically or sexually abused; in fact, I have never known real fear. When I began this project, I adamantly stated that I had never been emotionally

abused. Upon further reflection, I do realize that I have experienced this in a work situation. While this is different in nature to abuse by an intimate partner, it sheds light for me on certain aspects of this form of abuse. As a person who had always had a voice and was very self-confident, this experience had taken away my voice and did much to shatter my confidence. The person involved was not someone to whom I was emotionally attached, and yet this experience had a profound effect on me. How much greater must the experience be for someone who is hurt by someone whom she loves or loved?

I have spent years listening to women talk about the abuse they have endured at the hands of a man they either did or still do love. I have come to believe that battered women are the strongest women alive; they are living proof that “what doesn’t kill you makes you strong.” I have had many opportunities to be the voice for battered women as I published weekly newspaper articles, created educational programs and coordinated a Second Stage Housing program. Sometimes I wonder if I have the right to tell this story. Unfortunately many women who are directly affected by abuse are not in a position to speak of it; in fact, any talk of it at all could have serious repercussions for most.

I’ve reflected at length on why I have such a strong need to give voice to this topic. Perhaps a small part of it comes from that piece of me that sees life like a big lottery game. Whose family did you land into when your birth number came up? Perhaps it’s chance or maybe there’s a bigger plan, but it hardly matters because luck - good or bad - and chance follow us daily. You may have started out in what looked like the right place but ending up with the wrong person or in the wrong place can happen so easily and life can change so drastically.

My life's "luck" landed me in a safe, secure and loving family headed theoretically by my dad who was an RCMP officer but, in practice, by my mom. I bring this up simply as a illustration of the family environment I knew; one in which responsibilities were shared and, certainly, the power and respect was, as well. Although dad wore the uniform of the law authority, the authoritarian figure stopped at the door and he was just a loving dad and husband in our family. This is where paths divide in the families of chance.

I often sat at the table trying to digest the stories abused women had shared with me, as dad sat in his uniform representing public safety and security, and I kept wondering why women still weren't safe. I was conducting interviews with battered women on how the "system" was or was not working for them, and I was repeatedly told stories that clearly indicated that police were often reluctant to respond or assist in cases involving abuse within the family context. It often became supper-time conversation and while actions of individual officers could not always be understood, dad would attempt to clarify current policy and procedure with regard to response. The mere words sounded so cold and official. I learned that most cases were falling through the cracks because of a lack of willingness on behalf of the victim to cooperate with police regarding charges. Of course, they "could" not rather than "would" not, but that apparent unwillingness became a shield of escape for both police and perpetrator. "You have to have the evidence and if she won't testify, you have no case," was the common police response. Yet, I could never get around the fact that when a person is murdered and the victim is obviously unable to testify, police still lay charges. The difficulty in getting the police to take action when physical abuse is involved, illustrates the added importance of validating emotional abuse.

In keeping with a feminist approach to research, it is critical to recognize that women's experiences are unique to women and they are the experts in terms of knowing their own experience (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986). Also from a feminist perspective, I recognize that the reality of one woman could be the reality of another simply based on our shared gender.

Why should I care about this subject? I am a woman. What do I bring to this research? I bring the knowledge that this phenomenon has not directly affected me in the sense that I have ever been abused by an intimate partner. It has certainly affected me in the sense that I, my mother, my sister, my best friend, my female neighbor or any other woman could be affected simply because we are women.

Once you hear an abused woman's story, it never leaves you. Through this research I hope to feel a new connectedness to the topic by listening to women's stories, validating their pain and attempting to bring about a new awareness of this phenomenon. Research for me should include some component of "passion" in terms of that which is being explored. I have that passion for this topic and I believe that it is possible that this passion can exist in harmony with this research. The technique necessary is one of constructively using the passion I have for exploring this topic as a measuring guide for ensuring that I am true to the findings, to the process and to those involved in the study. My need to ensure that I am doing the topic "justice" because of my connectedness to it can serve to guide me without leading me.

This thesis is designed to validate the issue of abuse of women and, more specifically, the phenomenon of emotional abuse. Having had the privilege of working

with abused women and collecting their stories for a previous project, I heard a recurring theme identifying emotional abuse as the most damaging component of an abusive relationship. I have witnessed first hand the wounds of victims which are visible to the eye: the burns, the bruises and cuts. These wounds, according to the women, will heal in time. It is recognized that external bruises do eventually heal and I propose that the emotional abuse needs to be validated for women so that the internal bruises can begin to heal.

This study is designed specifically to look at the impact of emotional abuse, particularly since very little research has been done to date on this issue. There are many instances where emotional abuse is directly linked with physical abuse throughout the current study. When a woman is hurt physically, it is almost impossible to separate the emotional or psychological impact because it occurs simultaneously. For every act of physical violence, there are emotional consequences. There are situations, however, where emotional abuse can occur in the absence of physical abuse. This study will attempt to reflect emotional abuse in both contexts, with and without the presence of physical violence. Pagelow (1984) highlights the many forms abuse can take:

Just because you haven't been physically hurt does not mean that you are not in an abusive situation. Women are battered and abused in so many ways by the men with whom they relate intimately and by the double standards of patriarchal society and its institutions. Non-physical abuse may not make the headlines, but it is just as real and can produce indelible scars, however invisible they may appear to be. Emotional abuse (demeaning verbal assaults, humiliation, isolation, jealousy, economic dependency, ridicule) assaults a woman's self esteem and makes her feel "helpless." In many cases, such psychological abuse is a prelude to physical abuse. (Pagelow, cited in Mulligan, 1991)

Women's stories need to be told, not just for what will be heard but to allow the opportunity to give voice to the teller. I come with the preconception that women often do not have or somewhere lose their voice, and this is even more common for the abused woman. The sensitive nature of this subject requires that I have a great deal of empathy, warmth and respect in order to properly provide that opportunity for voice. The respect I have for women who are able to survive in a world which, by chance or not, has dealt them such pain serves as the catalyst driving my desire to validate their stories.

I hope that this research will not only validate the stories of those who are interviewed but each and every woman who is at risk. Emotional abuse can happen to any woman. It does not limit itself based on factors such as age, economic status, confidence level or family background. I once thought that only people who had low self-esteem could become victims. I now realize that any woman has the potential of being at risk. Regardless of her level of confidence or security going into the relationship, the erosion of self esteem that takes place when a woman is emotionally abused will change how she feels about herself. The ongoing assault on her feelings of self-worth will affect her ability to respond and can serve as one of many factors in keeping her trapped in this situation. No woman is exempt from the potential of being reached by the phenomenon of emotional abuse. It is critical, therefore, that we have a better understanding of its impact and the resulting *"wounds women wear."*

CHAPTER TWO: VALIDATING THE WOUNDS

The Importance of this Research

**If you bring forth what is within you,
what you bring forth will save you.
If you do not bring forth what is within you,
what you do not bring forth will destroy you.
(St. Thomas Logianin, cited in Evans, 1996)**

What portion of the female population suffers from emotional abuse? Statistics reveal that “one in eight” women report the fact that they suffer from abuse at the hands of their partner (Mulligan, 1991). Considering the fact that one in eight is reporting, it is likely that the actual number is significantly higher. Some sources, such as Nicarthy, (1997) estimate that the actual figure may be as high as one in four. “Somewhere between twenty-five and fifty percent of women who have intimate relationships with men will be physically abused by them at least once. Emotional abuse is even more prevalent” (p. 30). Regardless of the actual figure, based on the number of reported cases, the phenomenon of woman abuse and the “wounds women wear” is deserving of attention.

Abuse falls into many categories. This study will examine specifically the aspect of emotional/psychological abuse, which has often been identified by victims as the form of abuse which “hurt the most” and had the “longest impact” in terms of healing. The lack of research in this area along with the following facts, warrant validating the phenomenon of emotional abuse. The courts do not recognize and, therefore, validate this form of abuse

in terms of a criminal act, women are often unaware of the fact that emotional suffering meets the criteria of “abuse” for entering a shelter, and the impact of the abuse and remaining scars are often devastating for women.

I know that by my reaching out and trying to help other victims, I am also helping myself heal. My emotional scars are very deep. Eventually, with time, my feelings of fear and anger and powerlessness have lessened and some sense of purpose has replaced them.

(Jane Hurshman, cited in Vallee, 1993, p.32)

A woman put a rifle to her common law husband’s head and pulled the trigger. He died and the eleven member jury returned a verdict of “not guilty.” As impossible as it seems such was the case when the courthouse verdict came back in Liverpool, Nova Scotia, on November 20, 1982. What circumstances could lead a court room of people to offer thanks for this verdict after a man’s life has been taken? Maybe it is understandable when we know that the woman on the other end of the shot gun was Jane Hurshman. The years of torture she suffered were described in her words when she said, “I’ve just been to hell, touched it, felt it and came back again.” (Oickle, 1993, p.15)

No words can describe what authors would later chronicle as Life With Billy (Vallee, 1986). It is enough to know that a jury was willing to say “not guilty,” even though the accused admitted her guilt as she recounted the details of the events that resulted in Billy Stafford’s death. While some might argue that it is never acceptable to take a life, the words of the staff sergeant involved in the case sum up what others felt when he said, “She deserved a medal for what she had done.” (Oickle, p. 42)

How can one begin to identify why this current study is necessary? Is it necessary to recount Jane's testimony of the unspeakable acts she encountered at the mercy of her partner, the ongoing physical and emotional abuse or the acts of bondage, torture, sodomy and bestiality? Does it matter that this occurred less than two hours away from where this thesis is being written, or the fact that in 1985, in the very county where this outrage took place six out of eleven municipal councilors voted that "a local transition house was not needed"? (Oickle, p.85) One of the male councilors claimed transition houses "become almost a vacation spot for some women and entice the women to leave their homes and families." (Oickle, p.86) Another male councilor claimed that women are often a major cause of their own problems and what some women need is "a good kick in the backside." (Oickle, p.86) Jane's testimony to the need was in sharp contrast. She described an event in which Billy had shot at her and threatened to kill off her family one by one.

Never again did I see the slightest ray of hope. That episode left me purposeless. It left me with no choices – nothing to be, nothing to do, nothing to believe in. Nothing but emptiness and death. I didn't know how I was going to cope. Stafford had total control of everything in that house.

There was no emotion left in me. I would crawl into bed, tired and worn out, and if I did sleep it was a fitful one. I was just as tired when morning came. Each day was a continuance of the day before it was never ending.

The fear was overwhelming. The pure hate for me and Darren would spew out of his mouth without warning. All activity in the house was tense – hearts pounding, afraid to move, afraid to breathe.

(Jane Hurshman, cited in Vallee, 1993, p.66)

While councilors in Liverpool were voting against transition houses, the same was occurring at the other end of the province. The message was clear as I attended a councilors' meeting in Sydney Mines in 1986, in which almost identical comments were

made directly to me. A female councilor had invited me as a representative of Transition House to give a presentation that would help in creating support for funding. I left that day knowing that funding was not coming and felt sorry for the women living in the homes of many of the councilors I had just met.

It would be logical to think that for all the suffering Jane Hurshman endured, society would have been outraged to the point of action. In the end, Jane was dead; ironically, not at the hands of Billy but, in my opinion, at the hands of a society ill-equipped to know what to do or how to do it so that women like Jane could live. It might have been enough for her to live with the memories of abuse she suffered or to live knowing she had to take another's life. But perhaps what was more than Jane could accept was a society that sits back and allows this to happen. "The time for action is now. As society we are doing a very poor job helping these victims and until this changes, more and more women will continue to suffer in silence and more will continue to die." (Hurshman, cited in Oickle, p.92)

I do not think that Jane Hurshman's story was so different from many others, except perhaps in the sense that it got international recognition. The recognition came not because of the horrendous abuse she suffered, but because she shot her common-law partner and was found not guilty. This is why Jane's story got told. But what about the many, many others? What about those who have not reached for a gun to end the abuse? The statistics from Mulligan (1991) certainly help to tell their stories:

- A conservative estimate is that almost 1 million women in Canada are battered each year.

- One in five murders in Canada is a result from domestic violence. Eighty-five percent of them are by men against women.
- One in eight Canadian women is a victim of wife abuse.
- One out of every 100 Canadian women approaches a transition house or shelter or applies for a divorce because of abuse.
- One in four calls for rooms in transition houses in Ontario cannot be accommodated because there is no space available. (p.3.5)

MacLeod (1987) reminds us that dramatic statistics were laughed at by our political leaders: "On May 12, 1982, when the problem of wife battering was raised in the House of Commons as a serious and widespread reality suffered by one out of ten Canadian women, laughter echoed through the House" (p.3). Society has been made aware that violence against women occurs and cannot ignore findings such as those from a Status of Women Report (1986) which stated: "Briefly, the study found that, in 1985, in the 110 houses which were able to provide statistics on the number of battered women who stayed in their houses, 20,291 women were accommodated" (Cited in MacLeod, 1987, p.6). MacLeod extrapolates from these figures the fact that if all 230 shelters in the country had similar statistics, about 42,000 women would have been accommodated across the country in that year.

It is also known that with every physical act of violence, and even without physical acts, come repeated forms of emotional/psychological abuse. The statistics, however, do not appear to be enough to bring about proper interventions to act against this form of repression. Statistics do not give the whole story which gets complicated when acknowledging that many women are not prepared to accept the simplistic "bad man-good woman" notion (MacLeod, 1987). This notion lends itself to a clearer course of action for

dealing with abuse but as MacLeod states, "The early clarity of vision accomplished much. But at the same time it produced quandaries and inconsistencies: it failed the test of reality - the test of battered women's realities" (p.4). Why do abused women insist on talking of relationships, commitment or love? It is only through talking with battered women and hearing their stories that one can begin to determine how to proceed in gaining insight to this complicated phenomenon. Understanding the "cycle of violence" is a starting point in this process.

The Cycle

You know life was a roller-coaster with Bill. In the end, of course, that became unbearable - all the tension. But in the beginning, it was so thrilling. I never wanted to come down.
(Survivor, cited in MacLeod, 1987)

A clearer understanding of the cycles a woman encounters in an abusive relationship came when (Walker, 1979) introduced a new model known as the "cycle of violence." She introduced a spiral concept consisting of three phases which continue to repeat themselves throughout the relationship of an abused women and her partner. The three stages were described as "the eggshell stage," "the violent episode," and "the honeymoon stage." As the relationship continues, the cycle repeats itself more frequently, with the egg shell and honeymoon stages shrinking in size and the violent episodes lasting longer and happening more frequently. In visualizing this, one comes to see before them something that could be described in a "tornado twister" visual where things just get tighter and tighter with the internal force growing and feeding on its own intensity.

The cycle of violence was first introduced to help understand what abused women face and how it is that they are often caught staying in this relationship. There are a number of concepts in the cycle of violence which are critical to the phenomenon of emotional abuse. The “egg shell” stage, for example, is that stage where the woman can sense that tensions are building and that she has to be cautious with her every move. In this phase, a great deal of emotional abuse occurs. This phase will build until a violent episode occurs. After the violent incident, the abusive partner is often remorseful for the act, especially if it is the first time physical injury is inflicted. The remorse leads to the “honeymoon” phase in which he is attempting to make up for what he has done and the messages sent are the opposite to those given in the “egg shell” stage. At this point, the abused woman is often left with a mix of emotions, having suffered the abuse of both stages and then being left with the reversed actions which often include begging for forgiveness, giving of gifts, making of promises that it will never happen again and so on. Wanting to believe he is sincere and getting to see that positive side of the man with whom she fell in love, she will do everything possible to try to make it work.

The understanding of this cycle, which has been repeatedly told by those who have entered shelters for battered women, provides a small peek into the emotional turmoil that a woman experiences as she lives out the various stages. Having experienced one full cycle (and for most it is many, many cycles) she does not have to experience the physical abuse to know that the possibility exists. Once the act has occurred, the possibility is ever present and this in itself becomes a form of abuse. The abused woman will recognize familiar signs in the “egg shell” stage in which she knows that things could break at any time. The woman again suffers the threat of repeated physical violence, as well as

emotional abuse which will be overtly or covertly directed at her during this time. The works of Walker (1979), MacLeod (1980, 1987) and Sinclair (1985) were important in developing initial frameworks, such as the “cycle of violence” for understanding the concept of why women stay in abusive relationships.

Over the decades between Walker’s introduction of the cycle of violence to the present day, there have been numerous publications of books and articles on violence, with a particular emphasis in recent years on abuse as it relates to adolescents in what it now being referred to as “date abuse.” In the context of the battered woman the language has changed over the years in the literature. In the late eighties and early nineties abuse was referred to most often as “family violence,” while others named it “domestic violence.’ Those involved in the battered woman’s movement challenged these terms from that context. These terms seemed to underplay the significance of the crime behind the shield of being a “family” matter, which often served as an excuse for courts or police to not involve themselves. The reality is that “More violent crimes occur in the home than outside its doors, and more violence occurs between family members than among strangers” (Pagelow, cited in Mulligan 1991, p.1)

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

I was struggling to find the right framework that would allow me to gather the information I needed but do so in a manner that was respectful and supportive to the participants. I was considering symbolic interactionism as a possibility when I came across the legend of the thorn bird. The thorn bird legend served as a metaphor to me of the emotionally abused woman. I could understand that thorn birds conducted their lives in a manner completely understandable to them given their circumstances. I wondered if this could be applied to other situations. After learning that metaphors were used as a tenant in symbolic interactionism, things seemed to fit in place in a whole new manner. As an English teacher who delighted in the use of metaphors as a way of making connections, I suddenly discovered that symbolic interactionism could provide a forum for researching and describing in a manner that seemed most appropriate.

Having the thorn bird metaphor as a backdrop to consider as I interviewed participants, I had a new springboard which created an excitement in terms of presenting this topic. I postulated that women in emotionally abusive relationships saw things from a different perspective than those who were not in that situation. Metaphors could provide a means of understanding the symbols that the participants had attached to their life experiences and their understanding of emotional abuse. The metaphor of the thorn bird was one to which I could relate, and I wondered if the women I would interview would have their own metaphors to share. The framework of symbolic interactionism would provide me with the opportunity to find out.

Symbolic Interactionism

The History

The study of human behavior is the study of human lived experience and that human experience is rooted in people's meanings, interpretations, activities and interactions.
(Prus, 1996, p.9)

Herbert Blumer is credited with being the originator of the term "symbolic interactionism" and he had a profound effect on social theory and methodology (Harris, 1996). This form of interpretive inquiry (which was at the centre of the theoretical and methodological reorientation of the 1960s and 1970s) is the study of how the self and the social environment mutually define and shape each other through symbolic communication (Chenail, 1997). George Mead's book Mind, Self and Society (1934) was considered to have had considerable influence on the development of this framework. Although Blumer appears to be the "grandfather" of symbolic interactionism, his work was greatly influenced by others in the field:

A respected critic and devotee of George Herbert Mead, Blumer expounded with fervor on the importance of meaning to the individual as an acting entity, the primacy of direct empirical observation as a methodology, and the centrality of the 'definition of the situation' introduced by W.I. Thomas. Blumer's thought was also heavily influenced by John Dewey, the noted Pragmatist (Harris, 1996).

Dewey rejected the notion he called the "spectator theory" of knowledge - the idea that thinking refers to fixed things in nature, proposing that for each idea there is a

corresponding thing in reality. Dewey also purported that human beings were best understood in relation to their environment. One major point which impacted Blumer was Dewey's emphasis on "the dynamic interaction between Man - as a biological organism- and the natural world. For Dewey, the goal of thought was an adjustment between Man and his environment" (Harris, p.1).

George Herbert Mead was also influenced by Dewey. In drawing on Dewey and Charles Cooley, Mead stressed "the conscious mind and the self-awareness and self-regulation of social actors (i.e., the individual who performs the action)." Mead asserted that we become competent in the production and display of social symbols by reflecting on ourselves as others see us. Mead believed that "while human nature is part of evolution and nature the importance of language and symbolic communication as an aspect of this evolution is such as to free human action from natural determinism" (Harris, p.1).

"The interactionist's conception of human behavior assumes that behavior is self-directed and observable at two distinct levels - the symbolic and the interactional (or behavioral)" (Blumer, 1966, p.535). "Self-directed" refers to the notion that individuals act toward themselves as they would any other object. Blumer (1966) refers to this behavior as "self interaction" which allows the individual to "perceive himself, have conceptions of himself, communicate with himself, and act toward himself" (Blumer, cited in Manis & Meltzer, p.535).

An important aspect of this position is the understanding that one's world does not consist of objects that have set intrinsic meaning, but that the meanings of objects emerge in relation to one's environment. The attachment of meaning comes from symbols

through language resulting from interactions with others. One works, therefore, simultaneously with oneself and others.

Principles of Symbolic Interactionism

Manis and Meltzer (1978) outline seven principles of symbolic interactionism against which methods and sociological activity should be evaluated. These principles should be considered by any researcher using this method and served as a framework for conducting this research.

The first principle states “Symbols and interactions must be combined before an investigation is complete” (p.67). It is not enough to focus only on the symbols, rather symbols should be considered in relation to behavior exhibited by the participants. Documenting facts around one’s definitions of relevant objects is not enough; these symbols need to be understood in relation to the behaviors that accompany them.

The second principle asserts, “The investigator must take the perspective or ‘role of the acting other’ and view the world from his subjects’ point of view-but in so doing he must maintain the distinction between everyday and scientific conceptions of reality” (Manis & Meltzer, p.67). This principle presents a challenge for the researcher to view human conduct from the point of view of those being studied. The understanding of perspective is a critical concept in interactionism. In coming to understand perspective from the acting other, the researcher must avoid substituting her own perspective for that of the other. Interpretation and concepts have to be formed based on the meaning given by the participant, not the researcher.

The third principle is “The investigator must link his subjects’ symbols and definitions with the social relationships and groups that provide these conceptions” (p.67). The importance of recognizing the impact of social structures on groups and to individuals is critical to the interactionists’ study. A link must be made directly through the research and not simply left for inference. It is important to determine the influence of society or social structures on shaping the participants’ attitudes toward social objects.

The fourth principle states, “The behavior settings of interaction and scientific observation must be recorded.” (Manis & Meltzer, p.67) Situational context is extremely important and will serve to influence symbols, meanings, conceptions of self, and actions toward social objects. It is important to investigate how participants respond in different situations or determine norms that have been created for particular contexts. Research must consider the capturing of meanings and definitions of a situation and self attitudes of participants in varying situations.

The fifth principle explains “Research methods must be capable of reflecting process or changed as well as static behavioral forms.” (Manis & Meltzer, p.67) The research should be able to reflect both of these forms. The steps that are followed during the lived experience of a participant are critical in understanding how meaning is formed for her. This meaning is gathered from understanding life history and participant observation.

The sixth principle points out that:

Conducting research and being a sociologist is best viewed as an act of symbolic interaction. The personal preferences of the sociologist (e.g. his definitions of methods, his values and ideologies, etc.) serve to shape fundamentally his activity as an investigator, and the major way in which he acts on his environment is through his research methods. (Manis & Meltzer, p.67)

By engaging in the research, a form of social interaction is taking place in terms of the researcher's attempt to bring experiences to a level of shared meaning. In this sense, the research method serves as an important means of determining the environment that will provide the information. The researcher's own attachment of meaning and understanding of symbols will influence choices in terms of methodology. The choice of open interviews as opposed to information collection through surveys is a demonstration of choice of interaction. The researcher must be able to choose and implement methods that will demonstrate an ability to develop, test or modify existing theory through her framework.

The seventh principle demonstrates that "the proper use of concepts becomes sensitizing and not operational; the proper theory becomes formal and not grand or middle range; and the causal propositions more properly becomes interactional and universal in application" (Manis & Meltzer, p.68). Operational definitions can clearly outline how something will be measured. Sensitivity approaches leave things open until the researcher is in the field and able to learn the process being represented and the meaning attached by those being observed. It is only after the meanings of certain concepts are understood that appropriate methods can be applied to measure its characteristics. In the end, all concepts will be operationalized to some extent but the sensitizing approach delays this process.

This allows the researcher to discover the uniqueness of each empirical instance of a concept while uncovering it in a variety of settings.

These seven principles outline an interactionist foundation which allows the researcher to go into the project with methodological considerations at the forefront. Understanding these key concepts is crucial to the process of deciding that symbolic interactionism is the most appropriate framework for coming to understand the lived experience of women who have suffered emotional abuse. Recognizing that the researcher holds a perspective which must not affect information-gathering, or which must be suspended for this purpose, is fundamental prior to the creation of any research strategy. The impact of perspective, for example, within the framework of open-ended interviews as compared to a structured survey can be substantial. In choosing a framework for research, the researcher chooses a means of interaction. The choice of a symbolic interactionist approach for the purpose of understanding the “Wounds Women Wear” reflects my perspective on how this phenomenon should be investigated and best serves the role of giving voice to the story tellers.

Tenets of Symbolic Interactionism

Metaphor of the Thorn Bird

There is a legend about a bird that sings just once in its life, more sweetly than any other creature on the face of the earth. From the moment it leaves the nest it searches for a thorn tree, and does not rest until it has found one. Then, singing among the savage branches, it impales itself on the longest, sharpest spine. And, dying it rises above its own agony to out-carol the lark and the nightingale. One superlative song, existence the price. But the whole world stills to listen and God in His heaven smiles. For the best is only bought at the cost of great pain...or so says the legend. (McCullough, 1977, The Thorn Birds, Forward)

Common connotations of the word “bird” suggest things such as freedom, flight, carefree, or singing. “To soar like an eagle” is something for which many strive. “Birds of a feather flock together” and so one visualizes a social and supportive aspect related to birds. Many people may associate the bird symbol with doves of peace or love birds. Charon (1979) explains that words are symbols which stand for something and often we attribute generalized meanings to these words. “Like all social objects, symbols are used, and are defined, according to their use” (p.39). The difficulty in communication comes when it is assumed that words and symbols contain the same meaning for all of us.

The thorn bird does not represent all the commonly held associations of the word “bird.” It is often the case that great things happen at the cost of great pain. If one were to look from the outside at the plight of the legendary thorn bird, one might be inclined to think that no one song could be worth giving up one’s life. One might wonder what the purpose in that would be, given the end result. Questions center around whether the bird pays that price simply because it knows no other way or if it might change its course if it could. An examination of these questions would have to consider that we have never experienced the life of the thorn bird, sang its song or looked for a thorn tree. Would we know its voice if we heard it, since we do not understand its language? A bird may be sacrificing its life in the woods in front of us without us knowing it.

The story of a woman who has experienced emotional abuse might be looked upon in the same way. A woman leaves her home, searching until she has found her thorn tree, and resting only when she finds it. In this spot, she is at home and has found her comfort zone in a location that would be unbearable or torturous for most of us. She seeks it not knowing why she is drawn there but knows that she cannot exist anywhere else. Many

people might pass judgment on her decision to be there and to stay. Like the thorn bird, no one is able to unlock the secret behind the price that is willing to be paid. We fail to realize that she cannot sing in our location and that our voice, our songs, our dreams are not hers. It is only in understanding her language and her song that we can understand her ways.

To go to that tree of thorns is a difficult journey not only for the researcher but also for the woman entangled within. Perhaps to enter her world might cause us to risk too much, to feel the pain or to question what we are prepared to sacrifice. We ask why women who are emotionally abused stay; we rarely ask how we can truly help. To help, we would have to risk, to enter their world, to attempt to understand their lived experience. We have to understand the thorns which represent the world in which she lives, the song which represents pain through form of death and possible rebirth, and the bird, which is the woman herself.

I had to kill a bird once. I can't tell you what kind of bird it was; I couldn't look closely enough. All I knew was that it was injured, and I wasn't prepared to allow it to suffer. I have asked myself many times whether or not I took the easy way out by ending its life. I somehow felt I was responsible because it was my cat who had injured it. I knew it was in pain and suffering and I could not bear that. Perhaps the bird could have. Perhaps I ended what I could not stand, rather than the bird. The anger I felt when I had to deal with this situation went in every direction. I cursed God for creating animals with an instinct to kill; I cursed my ex-husband for not being there to deal with this as he had been in the past; I cursed my cat for not being able to overcome what its instinct was

telling him and then I cursed myself for not knowing what to do. Perhaps I took the easy way out even though it hurt me so much to do it; but in the end, it was over quickly and the bird was no longer suffering.

I am left to wonder if the cries I heard from this injured bird were cries of help asking that I check the wound more carefully. Perhaps it asked that I go get another of its kind or perhaps it was asking that I place it in the thorn tree so it could sing more sweetly before it died. I will never know because I didn't have the courage to help this bird through the mending process or to find out if mending was possible. It was easier to accept that it was now damaged beyond repair and that my job was to end the misery. I will not know if that bird sang every day and was content to be rid of its present pain. Perhaps pain was a way of life and it could have coped very easily if nature could just take its own course.

In being presented the opportunity to gain insight into the phenomenon of emotional abuse, I realize that I cannot sit back from a distance and cast insight from afar. To understand the plight of the emotionally abused woman, I must risk going deeper into the forest. I must be willing to cast aside my opinions on where we should live and with whom we should live. I must be willing to enter this experience as an invited guest who has been permitted, if only briefly, to enter a world where most would prefer not to go. I can sit and wonder from the outside and then hope I am never presented with a wounded spirit. If I am going to be helpful, I need to have more insight and be willing to look at that which is painful in order to understand it more fully - not so that I can change it for someone, but so that I can understand how they understand it.

Symbols

In order to understand anything, we must find a common ground on which we can communicate. In examining the question of why women stay in emotionally abusive relationships, it cannot be assumed that the symbols we use, the language we speak or the perspectives we have are the same as those of the emotional abuse victim. Symbolic interactionism clearly points out that there is no universal meaning associated within any word, object or action. Perspective is gained based on the individual and the process of applying her own meaning to any given thing. "...perspectives are a set of symbols. We approach reality with the symbol; we see according to our symbolic framework" (Charon, p.45).

The symbolic framework developed is different for each person based simply on the fact that each individual is unique, has her own set of experiences and does her own interpretation of those experiences. Two people may witness the same event, but have two very different interpretations of what occurred. Add to the complexity of this the fact that the emotionally battered woman has probably created her own set of symbols which help her make sense of the world as she experiences it. It is not possible to apply my understanding of the world to her reality.

When I hear the word birthday cake, for example, this symbol represents for me a feeling of celebration of birth. My history has created for me a series of ongoing positive feelings and actions associated with birthdays and symbolized by the traditional birthday cake. For an emotionally abused woman who was never allowed to celebrate birthdays because she was "too fat" and would only "eat the whole cake," the perspective is quite

different. It is critical that in understanding the phenomenon of emotional abuse and examining the question of why women stay, that the research begin its process by understanding the perspective and lived experience of the woman who is in that situation.

If something which seems as straightforward as birthday cakes can actually be perceived as painful for another, how difficult must it be for that woman to attempt to be understood. Society, by its very nature, creates norms and generalized rules of what is acceptable and what is not and individuals are expected to adhere to these norms. When a woman doesn't, such as is the case when women stay in emotionally and sometimes physically abusive relationships, society asks the all too common question "Why does she stay?" The question is asked not as a means of trying to understand why she stays, but as a means of casting judgment on her decision or implying that she is the one who is somehow at fault because of her staying.

To suggest that it would be automatic for her to consider leaving is to make certain assumptions about the emotionally abused woman and her perspective on the situation. Given that only the individual can understand the perspective and world view of the reality she lives, one has to assume that it is not as easy as just deciding to leave. This leads us back to the frog that was placed in the boiling water. From the outside view, one might think jumping out of the pan would be obvious. Yet, that does not take into consideration the individual's response to the environment or adaptation factors.

Each day we sit in "our world" and look at the rest of the world from our perspective. Sometimes we are challenged slightly to imagine what the world looks like from the position of a minority culture, someone with a disability, someone who has been

diagnosed with cancer, the opposite gender and so on, but then we continue to live in our own world knowing we are comfortable here. We will never really experience being a different race, for example, or being a different gender so we can only learn of that perspective from someone who has lived it. Even in learning to understand it, we will not experience it. As a researcher, it is not my task to experience emotional abuse, but it is my role to attempt to understand it as it has been experienced by those who have.

It would not be fair for me to administer a test in French when my students don't speak French. Nor would it be fair for me to evaluate them using this criteria as a means to guide them. The same inappropriateness can be applied to all those who cast judgments on women or creates norm referenced guidelines for those with whom no communication has been attempted. Shelter workers often hear women say that they love their partner. Instead of thinking something is wrong with her, we must investigate what this woman's lived experience has been so that she is in this apparently contradictory position. Others may say they no longer love their partner but are unable to leave. What has occurred to create that perspective? Without having conducted the research, I might predict that the very nature of being emotionally abused would lend itself to creating perspectives for women that could make this process so much more difficult. To sit back from a distance and offer advice is like giving the French exam. The channel for communication does not exist for us to speak as though we understand. In asking an emotionally battered woman to give her opinion on another who is in a similar position, she would probably say she can't speak for another. People outside the situation, however, often feel that their voices should set the standard, and in so doing contradict the

symbolic interactionism model of no absolutes.

This research paper will not assume that any absolutes exist in terms of one's understanding of the symbols, words or perspectives in a woman's life. It will attempt to understand the phenomenon of emotional abuse by asking women how they experience it and how they make sense of the reality that they live. Recognizing that the process of living is not static and that individuals act as the agent of change, this thesis will examine how women learned to interpret the symbols in their lives, how their perspectives were shaped and what things may have helped create change.

This study will begin with the definition of "emotional abuse" based on the current literature, although a part of this study will include creating a definition as identified by those who are interviewed. At present, the research will operate from the definition outlined by Mulligan (1991):

Emotional or psychological abuse includes threats (against self, the woman, children, friends and family); controlling or disrupting the woman's personal routine (such as eating or sleeping), monitoring her movements out of the home, keeping her in a state of anticipatory terror, financial control, and child stealing. Psychological abuse may induce greater fear in the victim if the threats of violence have been accompanied by at least one incident of physical abuse in the past. A woman may be kept in a state of anticipatory terror; learning to live in fear. Psychological badgering continually wears the victim down. (p. 3.40)

Developing Perspective

From a feminist perspective, literature will be reviewed and analyzed to describe

the context and history of abuse against women and the power imbalance that has existed in the past and currently exists today. This research project will focus on the need to ensure that individual voices are heard and represented within the context of the experience lived by each participant. For too long, research has often attempted to create broad generalizations which fail to recognize individual experience as illustrated by Belenky et al. (1986):

Those operating within a morality of responsibility and care - primarily women- reject the strategy of blindness of impartiality. Instead, they argue for an understanding of context for moral choice, claiming that the needs of individuals cannot always be deduced from general rules and principles and that moral choice must also be determined inductively from the particular experiences each participant brings to the situation. They believe that dialogue and exchange of views allows each individual to be understood in his or her own terms. (p.8)

The importance of women's stories is further identified: "Such insights are transforming our understanding and study of psychology and human development, paralleling transformations that are occurring in all of the intellectual disciplines that have begun to include the woman's voice" (Belenky et al., p.8). Operating from this feminist perspective, this research will draw on the most appropriate strategies to keep intact women's stories and the meanings they bring to their "way of knowing" (Belenky et al., 1986). To this this end, interviews will be conducted, borrowing from phenomenological strategies which provide the opportunity for women to tell their story. "There is a phenomenological ideal of listening without prejudice, allowing the interviewees' descriptions of their experiences unfold without interruptions from interviewer questions and the presuppositions these involve" (Kvale, 1996, p.135).

Having gathered the stories told by these women, a symbolic interactionism framework will present the means by which the lived experience has been interpreted by each individual. This approach recognizes that the world as experienced by the emotionally abused woman can only be understood by uncovering the meaning she attaches to symbols, language and actions. In order to understand decisions made by women, we must first understand the world through her eyes. Symbolic interactionism provides that approach and dispels the myth that applying "general rules and principles" to unique situations is the only useful/helpful approach.

Using this framework, women will create their own definition of emotional abuse. What it looks like, feels like, sounds like to them and how this form of abuse serves as a barrier to reaching their human potentiality. The question of why an abused woman stays in the relationship will be explored in relation to her lived experience and how she was able or unable to act as an agent of change.

"We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are" (Anais Nin, cited in Carlson, 1997, p.39). There are a number of reasons why the framework of symbolic interactionism was chosen to investigate the issue of emotional abuse. The expression "try walking a mile in my shoes" fits so appropriately with the concept of understanding individual reality. Each person has his or her own set of shoes and even within the community of "shoe-wearers", each person lives a unique reality. The changing of just one word allows for an infusion of new symbols and sharply alters the images produced when one says, "Try walking a mile in my "moccasins" or "bare feet." With the change of the word "shoes", something new has been revealed about the life of the person walking.

Immediately one realizes that it might be very different view from the path she is walking or the shoes that she is wearing.

Symbolic interactionism recognizes that, in an attempt to understand any person's reality, the concept of perspective has to be considered. The perspective shared by the moccasin wearer will differ from the shoe wearer or the person in bare feet. In investigating the concept of emotional abuse and women's response to emotionally abusive relationships, it is critical to come to an understanding of perspective for each individual who lives this reality.

Statistically, it has been demonstrated time and time again that many women are in and continue to stay in emotionally abusive relationships. This most often comes to be understood through examining the experience of women who also are being physically abused. It is learned through statistics that numbers are alarmingly high for women in and returning to these relationships. "A surprising proportion of battered women kept returning to their husbands/partners, despite the brutality of the relationship" (MacLeod, 1987, p.4). Positivist approaches to this phenomenon might reveal some insights into the numbers of women affected, occurrence of patterns of abuse, types of emotional abuse and so on. While much work still needs to be done in the area of emotional abuse as a whole, this information does not provide the key to a central question in this research: Why do women stay? In fact, the type of data which could be collected through a positivistic framework would probably do much to continue to beg the question.

Recognizing that the study of lived experience is rooted in people's meanings, interpretations, activities, and interactions, it must be understood that this is often a

contraversial point for those who do not share the same life experiences. To some degree, society has interpreted that women are negatively affected by the interactions and activities of the abusive partner. Applying meaning to this often adds up to the belief that women should leave these relationships and those who do not are often perceived as somehow being responsible for not taking action to change their reality. This is what leads to the necessity of a research framework that goes far beyond statistics, trends or norms. Venturing to understand from a symbolic interpretivist framework, may be the first step in committing to the women whose lives we are attempting to understand. This study is not about collecting statistics that lead to further questions, it is about coming to understand the lives of those who live this phenomenon.

Women in emotionally abusive relationships do follow a path that many others consider to be unhealthy and, indeed, dangerous. The underlying assumption in this approach is that there must be some reason why decisions are made by these women and that this is connected to how their individual perspective and lived experience was developed. Through a symbolic interactionist approach, individual reality will be explored and considered in relation to the society in which these women live. The perspective these women share may be shaped very differently from those who have not lived this reality. Symbolic interactionism allows for an understanding of this shaping through the stories of those who have come to make sense of their lived experience. In order to understand and validate these experiences, the positivistic path must be abandoned to give way to the call of the thorn birds singing from the trees of an interpretive forest that lies rich with questions and answers if an open mind is willing to pursue this path of knowing.

According to Blumer (1969), symbolic interactionism rests mainly on three main premises. The first is that human beings act toward things in a manner on the basis of the meaning that the things have for them. The second is that the meaning of such things is derived from the social interaction that one has with others. The third is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things encountered. All of these are key concepts in coming to understand how women live in relationships that are emotionally damaging. In using the metaphor of the thorn bird, one must consider what role is played by the interpretive process. Does one lead a life that is destructive to the self knowing that this may be the end result?

In essence, this study is a test for those who truly wish to understand symbolic interactionism and some of its benefits. People often attempt to apply their understanding of reality to another's situation and that is where confusion begins. It makes a big difference to know that moccasins are different from sneakers which are different from mukluks, etc. I may not know all the differences or the experiences of wearing each of these but at least it is recognized that perspectives will vary. Understanding the decisions a woman makes when she stays in a relationship that to the "outside world" appears unthinkable has to begin with understanding the past, the present and the future and how that particular woman understands it. If symbolic interactionism purports that freedom is a basic element which is critical to human interaction and if emotionally abused women are not able to access this basic freedom, then this is a critical point which must be central to this study.

In coming to understand reality as it has been experienced by these women from a symbolic interactionist perspective, we must explore the symbols that these women have come to know. It must be understood that the language we share is not necessarily speaking to them in the same way. What is love and who defines it for these women? This study will force us to put aside any preconceived notion that there is only one meaning or interpretation of any given word. Life experience has taught these women to create their own meanings and understandings of the symbols around them. They are not wrong in their interpretation, but it may vary from those who have not suffered emotional abuse. To say that love means name calling, hitting and hurting is not wrong if the dictionary belongs to a woman who has lived this.

It may be that there is a point where the interpretation of symbols among individuals collide. This could account for some of the discrepancy between those who think leaving is an option and those who do not. Laws have been created to attempt to force women to testify against those who hurt them physically and control them emotionally. Instead of working for these women, women have gone to jail refusing to testify against their perpetrator. To most, this does not make sense. For the woman who lives it, there appears to be no other way.

Agents of Change

Symbolic interactionism purports that individuals are active agents in bringing about change and that they are ever evolving and changing with regard to perspectives and actions. The idea that individuals control their own fate to some extent, in terms of their

response to life changes, is critical to the investigation of emotional abuse. Symbolic interactionism works on the assumption that individuals are free to make choices. This concept is critical in the sense that if that freedom does not exist for the emotionally abused woman, then immediately the perspective in understanding this phenomenon is impacted.

The concept of the individual as an agent of change will be explored in relation to freedom and the limitations imposed on the emotionally abused woman in terms of this concept. Through the voices of women, the tenets of symbolic interaction, specifically: metaphor as a way of knowing, symbols, perspective and the individual as an agent of change will be explored in the context of lived experience. Their stories, although often painful, are rich with action and interaction and their sharing presents a unique view of insights rarely exposed.

Method

A Qualitative Approach

Qualitative implies a direct concern with experience as it is 'lived' or 'felt' or 'undergone'...Qualitative research, then, has the aim of understanding experience as nearly as possible as its participants feel it or live it. (Sherman & Web, 1988, p.7)

In attempting the process of choosing methods for this project, it was recognized that the endeavor could not be one of creating surveys or collecting statistical data. The challenge in front of me consisted of "understanding experience." These are only two words, but to attempt to understand another's lived experience, particularly when that

experience was a difficult one, dictated that clearly defined methods be in place for such a task.

I had one participant in mind when I began this research and I approached her to see what she thought about research being done on this topic. She was quick to confirm that it was much needed and she agreed to be my first participant. Arrangements to involve another participant were made by our local shelter for abused women, through the Executive Director. To ensure the utmost of confidentiality, a name or number could only be passed on to me after agreement was given on the part of the participant. The person who was referred to me was someone whose story I knew nothing of prior to this research.

As each person agreed to participate, we met to review the project, discuss how we would approach it and review the conditions outlined in the consent form. This process was important because it initiated conversations regarding issues around confidentiality and safety. It was extremely important that we discuss the possible ramifications of discussing the difficult issues of this sensitive subject.

For both women, the issue of safety was not of concern for them. One participant revealed that her husband had passed away and the other said that her husband no longer lived in the area. Both felt that the amount of time which had passed was enough that they would not be too concerned about the memories they would be invoking and that they were able to deal with possible consequences of talking about it.

Interviews were conducted through face to face sessions. The process consisted of having "interviews as conversation" with each of the women and tape recording our sessions. The agreement to use a tape recorder was discussed with the women prior to

the first interview. It was made clear that the tapes would be destroyed upon completion of this project.

The interviews with both participants continued over a span of several weeks. After the initial meeting, we met on three other occasions and then again after the tapes were transcribed. Each participant was given a pseudonym rather than having the real name appear anywhere in the notes or files. For the purpose of the report, all names were changed to protect confidentiality. All interviews were transcribed at the earliest possible date following the interview. Having reviewed the information after the first interview, follow-up questions or questions of clarification were noted and brought to the following interviews. The length of time involved varied with each participant and every interview. On average they were an hour to an hour and a half long.

Both women were given the option of choosing the location and both felt after the first interview that they were pleased to continue in the same location. Interviews for one participant took place at the Women's Centre mostly because the evening worked best for her schedule since she was working in the day. The second participant had only one child still at home and she preferred that I come in the early afternoon while her daughter was in school.

I came to realize that a level of trust developed very quickly with both participants, but I was never unaware of the fact that every session was a gift from her to me. Tears were often shed and what I suspected was confirmed, no amount of time can fully erase the hurt that lies within a soul that has been wounded. The interviews were as bitter as they were sweet and I watched healing come as wounds were exposed to the air. The cost

of research is the price of looking the truth in the face, and I hoped and prayed that this research would not extract a price too high from the participants.

All interviews began by acknowledging the participant's courage and strength to share such a difficult and intimate story. Throughout this process, it was critical that the participants maintained a level of trust and safety with me as researcher. The risks that these women were taking in terms of opening the door on their hurt were phenomenal. It was crucial that the participant be able to go where she needed to go with the interviews and open-ended questions seemed to allow for this. Time was allotted during each interview to explore how she felt after the interview and during the time between interviews. Arrangements had been made to have a counsellor in place who was available at any time (24 hours a day) specifically for the purpose of debriefing and to respond to any fall-out from the interviews. The participants were also free to call me at anytime.

Much consideration was given to the number of participants to be interviewed for this project. The issue of quantity versus quality was considered at length. After interviewing the first participant on several occasions, I had determined that a study of one might be the most effective way to conduct this study, although in the end the decision was made to include two. As a researcher, I was becoming aware that my task was not to make broad generalizations or comparisons but to present the lived experience. I was slightly over-whelmed with the amount of information I had received from the first set of interviews and I wondered if I would be able to do justice to two full stories. Having decided on the framework of symbolic interactionism, I had come to realize that the process was about so much more than just taping interviews and presenting the

information. My task as researcher was to get to know how the person sitting across from me was seeing the world and interacting in it. In the end, it was decided that two might be helpful to have for comparison and contrast and in this sense they would serve to compliment each other and add to the telling of the stories.

Symbolic interactionism was becoming more than a new term I was reading about, it was guiding me in my actions and making me realize that I had to not only learn the language of the thorn bird, but also watch for her patterns of flight, nesting and so on. Entering her world meant sharing in her story and sharing in her pain, and this process was not something that could be passed over lightly or quickly. I recognized very quickly that there was an emotional toll to be paid by both participant and researcher and this project's strength did not lie in numbers.

Choosing Candidates

To gain a broad range of information, I interviewed women of different ages and somewhat different circumstances. The women were ages 36 and 54. One was involved in two relationships that were abusive while the other was married for 23 years to the same man. One woman was in a relationship that was both physically and emotionally abusive, while the other said she was never physically harmed by her partner. Both were residents of our local shelter for battered women. One woman came from a home where she had a very supportive family background while the other reported that her abuse actually began in her parents' home. Both women had children: one had three and the other had five and both women lived in different communities.

For the purpose of comparison, I felt that trying to find some differences would be important as a starting point but as I came to understand more about symbolic interactionism, I realized that “lived experience” can even make similarities different. Contrasts are not as important when one is trying to discover reactions and interactions to situations. Had these two people been the same age with the same family history and pattern of partner abuse, the study would be equally valid as long as the investigation considered how these two people responded to their lived experience through their interpretation and use of symbols and language. I came to a sudden realization that differences were not as critical but did serve as an interesting point for comparison and contrast.

The nature of these in-depth interviews was not to go in with preconceived ideas of what I wanted or needed to hear. The process was one of listening to their stories, so I could come to understand a life experience that I have not know, the life experiences of two women who had been emotionally abused:

The purpose of in-depth interviewing is not to get answers to questions, nor to test hypothesis, and not to “evaluate” as the term is normally used. (see Patton, 1989 for an exception.) At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning that they make of the experience. (Seidman, 1991, p. 3)

Coding and Presenting

The process of making sense of the large amount of data I had collected was the next challenge ahead of me. A system was created in which codes were given to each sentence or paragraph of the interview. These codes represented broad concept areas

such as childhood, partners, impact and so on. After determining a code for each phrase, sentence or paragraph, common selections from each category were put together to create thematic sections. I decided that it was very important to keep the two stories separate when they were presented, as each is a unique story and is best understood by having presented as it was lived, as its own story.

I have kept the words of the women regarding any particular theme intact, without interruption or interjection because this is how I heard the story. The stories are theirs to tell, mine to react to. I make comments as introductions to their words and follow-up responses after their stories for each of the themes. In these sections, I attempt to relate the topics they discuss to the literature and to components of symbolic interactionism. Further discussion will be presented, following the two stories, in the Discussion chapter. As well as taping the interviews, I made notes before and after each of the interviews. These were notes regarding observations I made about the process or my own response and reactions. These have been incorporated into the document as well.

I chose to reverse the text colors in presenting the direct quotes from women who have lived the experience of emotional abuse. Like so many things in our world, people's words and actions are often seen as black and white; either you stay in an abusive relationship or you leave. So often we forget the critical pieces in between, the pieces which shape perspective and point of view. In typing the words of the women who have lived this phenomenon, I've reversed the font so that their words are in white and the background in black instead of the traditional black on white. I personally find that it causes their words to stand out, a primary purpose of this report. When I typed the words

on the page and changed the font to the color white, the text disappeared - it faded into the page. This process reminded me of something one of the participants said when she described herself as feeling like she did not matter. She said people would walk into a room with her there and say, "no one is here." By placing a background which is black behind their words, suddenly new life is given to the written word, it stands out on the page and cannot go unnoticed. While this process deviates slightly from established format, it is my hope that we are all open to slight variations that might produce change in the end. It is well past the time that the issue of emotional abuse is given proper recognition for the damage it has done and time is long overdue for the voices of women to be heard and validated. This variation in presentation is a small gesture of beginning this process and validating the perspective that comes from lived experience.

The task of representing these stories as accurately as possible within their context (in which they existed or still exist) demands that "non-judgment" be at the forefront of this work. It was truly an honor to be trusted by these women, and their willingness to share such an intimate piece of their lives with me is the first testimony of their courage and generosity. It was an honor to hear their stories and a challenge to attempt to present their journey. It is a big responsibility that should exist well beyond this project. Their stories often raise more questions than answers, but they raise issues that cannot be ignored. By hearing the stories of these two women, we know that wounds exist and we must understand not only how these women react to the wounds but how we react as a society. In the end, research, like all interactions, should reflect the message of George

Eliot when he said: "What do we live for, if it is not to make life less difficult for each other?" (Eliot, cited in Exley, 1992).

Meeting The Women

Dependency and Rage Go Hand-in-Hand

Learned helplessness and loss of self esteem
derive from an inability to love ourselves.

We turn outward and sometimes find faulty relationships
to fill the emptiness that continually haunts us.

Various relationships may temporarily fill the void for a while,
until disappointment and rage can no longer be repressed
and escalate to reinforce our inadequacy and powerlessness.

Depending on others to fill us with love when we are not complete
will only cause perpetual dependency,
instead of positive mutual dependency.

(Grey, 1996, p.15)

Introducing Jenny

The process of selecting participants for this project took a number of things into consideration. It was necessary to find someone who could dedicate the amount of time necessary and to ensure that the person's safety would not be in jeopardy. Much discussion was held with the directors of the Women's Centre and Transition House to assist in this process.

The Director of Transition House called early one morning to tell me that a woman had just agreed to participate in my research project. "She said 'yes'," were the words in my ears but the pounding in my heart was louder than her voice. "That's great" I said, as I took her number and then stared at the phone wondering why I wasn't dialing. I had read a number of books describing the process involved in doing "qualitative research",

but on paper you read about these things; in doing the research you live those pages and so much more. A complete stranger had just agreed to let me interview her so that she could tell me the deepest secrets of the pain she had endured in an emotionally abusive relationship. Of course I was thrilled at having another person, but suddenly she was not just a participant, she was a woman named Jenny and she had just offered such a big gift to a complete stranger. I liked her immediately.

I made the call and the next thing I knew I was to meet her in one hour, so that she could have time to get her child back to school after lunch. Based on this conversation I determined that she had a child. She said she met me once before when I was employed with Transition House. I couldn't place her and I wondered why she remembered me. I later learned that this woman has a memory for details that is truly amazing, and I can't help but wonder if this works to her disadvantage, given some of the memories she might have preferred to forget.

I learned from the Director that it has been five years since this woman was at Transition House. Suddenly, I was thinking about five years and the fact that it had been that long since my husband and I separated. Sometimes that seems like yesterday. I wondered if it did for her. Would talking about this bring things up that she'd rather forget? The question of whether or not this research was going to extract a price was the first question we discussed on the phone. I made a note to bring this up again when we would meet on that first day.

Driving to her house, I wondered if I would be willing to discuss my life with a stranger. I went over some things in my head to make sure that what I would say would

make sense when trying to convince her that she did not have to do this. I was suddenly feeling nervous and excited about this encounter. I convinced myself that I'd be all right once I get there.

As I pulled down her lane, I noticed the ocean in front of me and suddenly I felt calmer. I thought of how often I've turned to it for comfort and I hoped in my heart that it did the same for her since she lives so close. As she opened the door and uttered her first words, I'm reminded that perspective is everything. "What a cold wind we always get off that ocean," she said. The warm, soothing nature I associate with its blue belly had just shown another side which this woman lives. I was reminded that I was about to enter another's lived experience, and I can and must leave mine at the door.

As she opened the door, I thought Jenny looked vaguely familiar but I would never have known that we had met before. She is a wonderful woman who I warmed to right away. We sit each time there is an interview at the kitchen table and it feels like I'm there for a game of cards or some other "make yourself at home" event. She is a small woman, but her life has been large and she shares it without hesitation. I have no papers in front of me and she begins by saying, "I'm not sure what you want me to say." How do you tell someone you just want to know about their lived experience, come to understand their perspective, and learn to make sense of the meaning they give to symbols? You do it by getting to know the person and so we just talk and she learns about me and I learn about her.

Before long, I heard her say something that told me that we have developed a strong level of trust. As she was telling me her story, something came up and the next

thing we both know she is telling me something that she has only told two other people in her life. After the tape is turned off, she addressed this saying she didn't think when she started out that she would ever tell me that but that she was comfortable enough with me to share it.

As I drove home, I wondered about a lot of things in life. I wondered what it could be like to be treated the way these women have and still be so generous to others. I wondered how anyone could be so cruel to this gentle woman who was never allowed to bring a friend into her home. She is a person who would be such a good friend to others and I am suddenly aware of just how much is taken for granted in our lives.

In describing her 23-year marriage, she referred to herself as a prisoner. After meeting with Jenny, I would now say she has moved from prisoner to guard. She has learned that she must be protective and always on the watch for those who might do her harm. She has learned that she must never let down her guard and that people, particularly men, must earn any trust you give.

She once thought that all men were like her Dad, kind and gentle. She learned a hard lesson in finding out that this is not true. She refers to herself as extremely naive when she was younger and I believe that innocence was robbed from her in a way that thieves steal, without guilt or hesitation. Her perspective is an interesting one which differed in many ways from Cindy. Jenny came from a very supportive, religious family which sheltered her for many years from the cruel reality that exists in the outside world. Jenny married her first boyfriend, not because she loved him so much, but because she did not know what else to do. While still dating, he raped her and in her words, "I didn't

know what else to do. I felt so dirty and so ashamed. I thought it was the only thing I could do.” This is the point where perspective becomes so critical. This single act might have caused others to run. For Jenny, this act lead her into a 23 year marriage that turned out to be even worse than she might have predicted. She now says, “I knew in my heart I shouldn’t have married him, but that is all history now.”

There is much that is history now for the women who suffer emotional abuse and much to be learned from the history of one’s life. The decisions made by both Jenny and Cindy are directly linked to perspective and help us to understand how it is that women enter these unhealthy relationships. It made sense to Jenny to marry the man who took everything from her because, in her eyes, nothing was left for anyone else. Having a supportive family did not work to her advantage on this issue because she did not want to hurt them by telling them what happened. Instead she committed herself, like so many others do, to a life which would be controlled by a man who was often out of control. The respect I have for these women who live this life and survive to tell their story is more than can be described. My appreciation can only be matched by my desire to do justice to the stories of these women in a manner that serves to validate their wounds and respect the wearing.

Introducing Cindy

The other participant was a woman with whom I was familiar from my work at Transition House. The woman I will refer to as Cindy first came into my world in 1984, when I was asked to take her and her two year old daughter to an apartment the

Transition House had just found for her. I knew little about her situation except that she, like so many others, had ended up at Transition House because of an abusive partner. I dropped her off and thought little about her again until 14 years later when she came back into my life. I met her at a fund-raiser for the Women's Centre and she recognized me immediately. I looked closer to see if I could figure it out and discovered what was so different: she was 223 pounds lighter.

Cindy played a central role in my decision to choose to explore the issue of emotional abuse. I listened to Cindy as she was describing the time when her husband set the house on fire thinking that Cindy was inside. As she told further details of the story, I came to realize that she had returned to him following this incident. A million questions went through my mind, but since others were around, it didn't seem right to ask too many of them. I spent the rest of the evening aware that Cindy was someone who had one of the best outlooks on life I had met in a long time. As she told bits and pieces of her story, I sat in amazement that she could have lived a life filled with so many bumps and hurdles and still maintain such a positive outlook. It left me to wonder, what allows a person to suffer so much and still keep going? It made me question my own strengths and weaknesses and wonder if I could have ever endured the same. The answer, I concluded, was an unequivocal "no." That night stayed with me for weeks after and I gained a new respect for her and the many others who faced this challenge.

I later asked Cindy if she would consider being a participant in this study and she agreed. The first interview was held at the Women's Centre and took place in the evening. We had arranged for Cindy's older daughter to baby-sit the young ones and as I

sat in the driveway waiting for her, I thought of what a generous gift it was for her to give by sharing such a tough subject. As she got in the car, her first comment was, "I'm having a fat day." I would later come to learn that this was her way of saying she was having a day in which she didn't like herself.

Although we met at 7:00 o'clock, the tape recorder did not get started until almost an hour and a half later. We spent the initial time together mostly talking about me. I found that she was asking questions which I thought she deserved to know. By the time we started, it felt like the interview should be over and perhaps the roles of interviewer and interviewee reversed. Much was accomplished that first night that went far beyond collecting data. The level of trust we shared set the stage for the work that was ahead.

Two key points stick in my mind about that first interview. When the tape recorder was turned off, Cindy said something that struck to the core. She said, "You know, you have to wonder, I had two partners and both of them tried to kill me. What does that say about me?" Suddenly, for the first time that evening, I saw Cindy show the emotion she had learned to hide so often - her sadness finally surfaced as her eyes filled-up. She quickly changed the subject and the next thing I knew we were leaving. I reminded her as I dropped her off that we had arranged for a support person to be in place following the interviews. Leaving the driveway, I felt overwhelmed and I couldn't even imagine how she was feeling. I drove straight to the support person's house and asked that she call to see how Cindy was doing. Immediately, I knew it was the right thing to do as I heard her say, "Did you ever stop to think that you chose two men who were very much alike?" I breathed a sigh of relief as I listened to arrangements being made to pick

her up for coffee. All the way home, I gave thanks for having a committee that did so much work around the issues of protection of the participants considering all the ethical ramifications and ensuring that support was in place for the participants.

When I woke the next morning, Cindy entered my mind immediately. I wondered how last night went and whether or not she had gotten any sleep. I wondered if she could continue on, or if I could. From the kitchen, I could hear my mother as she opened the stove door to check on the biscuits she was baking for breakfast. This is a regular routine for her, but today this small act meant something completely different for me. Cindy had spent a great deal of time the night before talking about her mother and realizing that this was where the emotional abuse began. Cindy said that her mother constantly told her that she was fat and that she would never amount to anything. The recognition of the contrast in mothers was washing over me clearly and strongly as the aroma of biscuits which filtered through my senses. I was suddenly very sad. Why is the world so unfair and who chooses who will get mothers like mine and who won't? It seems so unfair that Cindy had no support from her family while she was dealing with two men coming into her life and both treating her so badly. I wondered if there was a connection.

A commercial came on the radio that morning advertising cakes from Dairy Queen for Easter. I am sure that I must have heard it many times before, but today it was causing me pain. I was responding directly to the events of my lived experience, those that occurred the night before.

When Cindy had described her childhood, one memory that stuck out for her was one of her birthdays as a child. She said that a friend had brought a cake to her and her

mother made her take it back. She told Cindy that she was too fat already and that she would only end up eating the whole thing. Cindy had six other siblings in the family who celebrated birthdays. She didn't get a cake until she moved out of home. She said, "I always knew I was unwanted in the family, I just didn't know what to do about it."

To describe Cindy would be almost impossible for me simply because I have not found a way that describes the essence of spirit that is contained within this one soul. She normally describes herself in relation to weight... "when I was heavy", "after I lost my weight" but if I had to describe her, it would be in relation to her belly laugh. She has a laugh that must start somewhere in her toes and reaches its peak about midway. By the time it is released, it snaps you into believing for at least a few seconds that the world is all right. In one of the interviews, Cindy described herself as feeling like the low person on the totem pole, that she always pictured herself as being a snake who couldn't be any lower to the ground. I on the other hand, see her quite differently. If I had to chose a metaphor, I'd say she was a crocus. She takes advantage of the harsh winter to prove that she will poke her head up first and that even the cruelty of winter will not break her spirit or opportunity for growth. She sets an example of strength for others to follow and without even knowing it, her spirit makes us look at life differently and be glad to know that while life was hard on her, she has not turned her back on it or stopped laughing to spite it.

CHAPTER FOUR: OPENING THE WOUNDS

Poison

What am I?
Like a poison I
work slowly and insidiously

coursing
through your
veins

strangling and
battering your
spirit

Eroding-
Erasing the
essence of you

Enforcing
isolation-
invalidation

to the core of
your existence

No witnesses
Nothing to point to
I leave no broken bones, no bruises
Just death of the spirit.

Weapon of choice
WORDS
like bullets
Aimed straight for the
heart.

(Poison, 1998)

Jenny's Story

When asked to begin by talking about the important relationships that existed in her life, Jenny began her story placing herself as the oldest in a family of nine and describing her life as a child. She talked of the close relationship she had with her father until he died eleven years previously and the fact that she is still very close to her mom. Her story quickly jumps from the secure family life she knew as a naive adolescent to life with a man who would control the next 23 years of her life. The following are selected quotes from Jenny's story concerning her adolescent years and meeting her husband:

The Early Years

I was really shy, and very naive

I was very sheltered, I guess. I came from an old fashioned family. When I graduated from high school, I went to the prom with the guy from next door because I didn't date. I was really shy, and very naive. As an adolescent, I didn't go out with the other kids or I wasn't like the kids today. I just didn't date. If I went out, I was involved in church groups and choir and that is what I did when I wasn't in school. I would stay with my girlfriends. I was just very reserved.

I was very careful about who I was with

I was always busy with other things. I had no intentions of leaving home until, as it turned out, I got married. I was a leader among my friends. I am not shy but very very careful who I am with, and I always was.

The church played a major role

The church played a major role; it was my life. My mother and father were married for 45 years and yes, divorce is all around, but you never think that it is going to be you.

...when I got married I knew I

When I was 25, I started to date this man and he was a different type of person than I had ever met. My father was medium to small and this man was big and different. At that point, he had a good job. I guess I was 25 and very naive, and we got married. This was my first boyfriend. I think

shouldn't
have

when I got married I knew I shouldn't have - but I did. I had an excellent job at that time.

I thought
all men
were like
my father

I had a big warning sign but I didn't know what to do about it. I didn't want to tell my parents because I didn't want to hurt them. Now I know that it wouldn't have hurt them, but I was young and naive. He probably knew, well he did know, that I was so naive .. I don't know how else to explain it. I went into the marriage not knowing what to expect. I thought all men were like my father, he was a gentleman, a really nice man and that wasn't the kind of person I married. Things were not like they are now, I didn't know how different my father was to my husband, until I lived with him.

This night
he raped
me... and
that's why I
married
him

Well I haven't told too many people this ..like I said I was a person who was very naive. I had never gone to a pub, but I was dating him and this night he raped me. I couldn't walk for three days and that's why I married him --- because I felt so dirty. I felt so ashamed and dirty and everything, that's why I married him.

My mother
is from the
old school

My family has played an important role in making me stay optimistic. My mother is from the old school, she lived next to us and when my husband would be drinking and fighting, she didn't hear it. She only sees what's in front of her, but she is a very good person and they all supported me 100%.

I think
inside I
healed

I think now that I am so old, I am the same type of person I was when I was 14 inside. I think I have gotten that back because now I know that I can come and go and do what I want but that doesn't mean that I am shirking my responsibilities. That was how I was made to feel before. I know differently now. I don't have the same kind of feelings inside. I don't have to worry about everything that I am doing and saying or who I talk to. So I think inside I've healed.

“I thought all men were like my father.” The words reached out and grabbed me as we were doing the interview. In keeping with the tenets of symbolic interactionism, the symbol of “husband” for Jenny was one which related to the characteristics she had

seen in her father. He was a gentle and loving man with whom she had a wonderful relationship. Jenny had her own definition of what men were like, based mostly on her father because of her limited experience with the outside world. She says that she had a very sheltered life and was very naive. Unfortunately her introduction to a new world came fast and hard and she was unprepared for what was ahead.

Jenny was extremely honest with me in telling me something that she had told very few people. She talked to me about the “warning sign” that she had with this man. When I asked what that sign was she explained that her husband raped her while they were still dating. Again, so many components of how we understand lived experience come into play with regard to Jenny’s reaction to this situation. Life, as she knew it, was about kind men and committing spare time to church activities. She was very close to her family but, instead of this serving as a catalyst to tell them what happened, she chose to protect them from the hurt. Regardless of her response, the fact is that this man used his power, and probably physical strength, in an abusive manner. She claims that he was aware of how naive she was and this was probably a factor in knowing he would get away with this act.

Her response was to tell no one about the rape and to marry him. In so doing, she committed herself to this man for what turned out to be 23 years. This was the only reason she gave for why she chose to marry him, “I couldn’t walk for three days and that’s why I married him—because I felt so dirty. I felt so ashamed and dirty and everything that that’s why I married him.”

It is critical at this point that judgment not be cast on her decision. Her words were spoken to me as if to say that it was her only option. Prior to this, Jenny had been working

at a very good job and was quite independent. She was a leader among friends and a confident person. Who can decide how a person should respond the morning after you've been raped? Only the person who sits in that position. The good Catholic girl has just been forced by this man who was "big and different" to consider choices she might never have imagined. A piece of me wants to yell, "run away, go tell your mother, never see him again" and yet that is my reaction to another's story. When that life is your own, it is never so simple. In the background I can hear a thorn bird singing.

The number of women who experience date rape is alarming and new studies are continuing to demonstrate how common this abuse really is. Hearing Jenny's story makes me wonder how many other women follow the same path and never tell what has happened. I wonder how many women live their lives paying the price that has been extracted by a man who abuses her body and spirit with his strength? Statistics presented by the Wolf (1991) give us some idea:

If women depicted in mass culture are "beautiful" and abused, abuse is a mark of desirability. For young men, "beauty" is defined as that which never says no, and that which is not really human: The date-rape figures show what lessons that teaches.

In 1986, UCLA researcher Neil Malamuth reported that 30 percent of college men said they would commit rape if they could be sure of getting away with it. When the survey changed the word "rape" into the phrase "force a woman into having sex," 58 percent said they would do so. (Wolf, p.16)

MS. magazine sponsored a study of 32 college campuses in the United States which showed shocking results. The study showed that in the year prior, "2,971 college men had committed 187 rapes, 157 attempted rapes, 327 acts of sexual coercion, and 854

attempts at unwanted sexual contact.” This same study concluded that “one college man in twelve, or 8 percent of the respondents, had raped or tried to rape a woman since the age of fourteen” (p.165).

Wolf brings up an issue which is extremely insightful, in relation to how men see women, in terms of what is “attractive” to them. While many women may be preoccupied with trying to look attractive by wearing the right thing or looking a certain way, it is shocking to hear that for many men what looks attractive is the look they place on a woman’s face when they use force against her:

Researchers at Emory and Auburn universities in the United States found that 30 percent of male college students rated the faces of women displaying emotional distress-pain, fear- to be more sexually attractive than the faces of those showing pleasure; of the respondents, 60 percent had committed acts of sexual aggression. (p. 165)

A Canadian statistic from Brickman and Briere (1984) in an article “Incidence of Rape and Sexual Assault in an Urban Canadian Population” illustrates that an alarming “one in four women” can expect to be sexually assaulted at some time in their lives. As well as using physical abuse, young men are also emotionally abusing the women they date. In one Canadian study on abuse in dating relationships for college and university students, 81 percent of male respondents reported that they had psychologically abused female partners (DeKeseredy & Kelly, 1993).

Date rape statistics were not the issue for Jenny because she could only experience this within the context of her own world. At that time, she felt very much alone in her

decision making. One has to wonder why she, like so many others, felt that they should be ashamed when this atrocity is happening to them. Questions certainly arise surrounding perspective when women carry the shame and not the men who commit these acts.

In a report from the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (1991), the blame and guilt that is carried by women, like Jenny, who have been sexually assaulted is outlined:

Victims/survivors of sexual assault and/or wife abuse suffer from chronically low self-esteem, they stop taking care of their appearance and their health, they blame themselves for the violence, and they feel overwhelming guilt. Women who have been victims of sexual assaults are approximately five times more likely to have a nervous breakdown, six times more likely to think seriously about suicide, and eight times more likely to attempt suicide, than women who have not been sexually assaulted. (p.11)

Her Partner

Jenny discussed at length her relationship with her partner who passed away two years ago. Jenny had been separated from him for three years prior to this. She said that her abuse was strictly emotional and that he never laid a hand on her. I assume that she meant after the rape. The issue of emotional control is at the heart of this study and is exemplified through Jenny's story. Jenny describes what it was like to know that her husband would not hurt her but would hurt someone she loved to get to her. Although he did not hurt her physically, he wounded her spirit.

As Jenny described her decision to marry the man who raped her, it was impossible for me to imagine all that he robbed from her in that act. A woman who is struck only once lives her life in fear, knowing the possibility exists. A woman who is date raped and

then spends her life with the same man, must somehow find a way of coping with that hurt. This issue was far too sensitive for me go deeper during the interview, but it raises an important issue- if interactions and life experience provide the definitions and symbols we acquire, how does someone like Jenny define love making? She remained married for 23 years to a man who was completely controlling and who raped her while they were dating. I do not know if it is possible for a woman not to relive that experience or at least associate it with each time she lies down beside that man. Based on our understanding of how we create definitions, and Jenny's first experience with a man, it seems her symbols were clearly defined for her. "That's what you did you know - you just got through each day."

The following quotes were selected as some of Jenny's words on her partner:

I never
want to see
you with
friends in
this house
again

When we were married a few months, I went out shopping with a girl I was working with. I asked her to come in for tea it was no big deal - he came home and it was the worst I ever saw him. He was furious. He said, "I never want to see you with friends in this house again," but I couldn't understand it. There was no way to understand it except that he was very sick...but I was really sick to stay with him, but I know that now.

I didn't
understand
then that he
was so
controlling

When I was married for six months, I discovered that I was pregnant so I worked until I was ready to have my baby and then I stopped working so I could stay home to look after my baby. Then after a year I wanted to go back. He wouldn't allow me to. I didn't understand then that he was so controlling - I just stayed home and did what I had to do. He didn't want it and I'm not an argumentative person so I stayed home.

He was a
fighter
...I'm not
like that

We sold our house and built a house right next to my parents. He was very very controlling - he was a fighter. If he went out anywhere he'd fight with everybody and argue. I'm not like that. I have never in my life been like that. I didn't live in that kind of an atmosphere.

He would say... you will never see your kids

Well, he always told me that if I ever leave, I would never get back in. So in the back of my head I would think, if I leave I wouldn't want to come back. But then he would say, "You will never see your kids again." I believed him. I know that is stupid because they wouldn't stay with him anyway, but that is not the way I felt about it.

He just started drinking more and more and more and abusing the children more...

All the time when the children were small if something went wrong he took it out on them. It got increasingly worse and worse and worse plus he was an alcoholic. I did go to work because I knew if I didn't I was going to cave. I worked for a couple of years and lo and behold I was pregnant again. I had three miscarriages in between. My son was eleven and I knew that if I didn't stop working I would miscarry. In between all this my father passed away. So I quit work and at that point and he decided that I should be working. I just couldn't work so he just started drinking more and more and more and abusing the children more and more and more. He got fired when my daughter was a year and a half. I had four children, my oldest was eighteen.

His reaction was that I lost his baby

My first miscarriage was terrible it took me over two years to get over it. His reaction was that I lost his baby. He said that right in the doctor's office. Two years later I lost another one and two years later another one. When I lost the first one, I was completely rundown and I had been hemorrhaging for a week before, and the doctor suggested that he have a vasectomy. The look that came on his face was like the doctor said hold out your hand and I will cut it off. He did not take that well.

He got fired

Then seven years later I got pregnant with my daughter. I was 42 and I thought this cannot be happening. That was when he wanted me to go out to work. We had gotten used to me working and I told him, if I keep working I will lose your baby; and I would have. So I stopped working and he got fired so, neither one of us was working.

You just got through each day

He just went from detox to home detox to home and I'd go get him and bring him back, and I just had to do these things. That's what you did you know - you just got through each day.

He beat him on the back with

Then when my son was 14 my husband beat him badly and it was so bad that I had to go to the police. He was a mess. He beat him on the back with the buckle of the belt. I was in the living room and I heard my son

the buckle
of a belt...

screaming and screaming like you have never heard in your life. I walked into the bedroom and he was in such bad shape, he was black and blue. So I went to the police...

"I'm not
going to the
police he's
my father

I waited until the next morning which was a Saturday morning and I stayed by his bed all night cause I was afraid he would take convulsions. I took the baby down to my mother's and I stayed with him and he was sobbing saying, "I'm not going to the police he's my father," so I said, "Wait till the policeman sees you and if he says it's not serious I'll take you home," but I knew.

I have to go
back...

So we went to see him and showed him and he said, "Who did this to you?" and I said, "his father" and he said to me, "don't go back there." I said, "I have to go back." He made really good money and he would say to me, "You'll get nothing" and I believed him, I really did believe him.

He had to
have this
front

He was a different person outside. When I was pregnant with one of my sons, I used to get nervous and I would faint when I saw anyone. I couldn't go to church because as soon as I would see ten people I would faint. After my son was born I still was nervous and he told me that if I didn't start going to church to leave because he was a good church going person and he wanted his family there. He had to have this front. If I hadn't left people still wouldn't know what it was like for me. After I left he started to terrorize the neighborhood because I wasn't there to terrorize. Soon they all knew what I had been living with. It wouldn't have leaked out from me if I hadn't left. My parents lived next door and they did not even know.

He had to
have power

I think the reason why he decided to build a house right next to my parents was that he knew that they would be there all the time. I guess it was a way of controlling. He had no reason to be jealous. I think he thought he owned me. He had to have power. Even when he worked he had to have power over the people he worked with. He had to be better. He was like that. I don't understand that. He got a job at a garage and he worked there for 12 years, and I would get calls from his boss saying, "Come get him, we can't do a thing with him." I would go and he would be fighting with the customers or he would be drunk.

I almost lost
my
personality

I was pregnant seven times and he just wanted me to be there with the kids and I got kind of swallowed up. I almost lost my personality. People who knew me then and see me now they say they cannot believe how much I

have changed. I couldn't even talk about things back then because I was afraid I would say something about him or something about home and I'd get into trouble. So I think I went into myself further during the time I was married.

I would be
so
embarrassed

We lived in one room for four and a half months when my son was in the hospital in Halifax. I don't know how we put up with it, but we did. My husband was an idiot, even in the dining room. I would be so embarrassed, nobody wanted anything to do with him.

I am better
off

I never regret leaving. We had a home and he set it on fire after I left. It was covered under insurance and it was done over and looks lovely, and people will say to me, "The house looks so great you should've stayed there," but I made the right decision. I did. I left with my two kids and their beds and I came here with nothing and I am better off. I am not financially better off, but I never had any doubts.

He said,
"You're not
going to let
me down."

I was cooking dinner and the phone rang. My daughter answered it and started to scream. I asked her what was wrong and she said, "Daddy's going to heaven." She said that her father told her that he was going to heaven. I took the phone and said, "Did you want something" and he said, "You're not going to let me down." I hung up the phone on him and tried to calm her down. He told her that this was going to be the last time he talked to her that he was going to heaven. I said he was just being silly and not to worry about it. An hour later I saw the fire trucks going by I looked out the window and could see it heading right toward my house. He burned the house down.

There
wasn't
anybody
that he
didn't hurt

I could never be comfortable to be with someone who drank too much, after what I lived through and watched what it does to other people, not to me. I didn't care about me that much, but it hurts everybody. There wasn't anybody that he didn't hurt: his mother, his sisters, his brothers, there's nobody.

You never
know what
can happen
in court

I filed for divorce when we were in Transition House. I knew that was what I wanted. We had to go to court because he wanted my youngest daughter who was almost five. His lawyer had me on the stand for 45 minutes wanting to know why I didn't want him to have her unsupervised. He took my son into the legion when he was 15 and then came home and told me. I have to know where she is at all times, I wouldn't know where she would

turn up. I had that fear, you never know what can happen in court. He couldn't look after her to cross the street, she would be looking out for the cars not him.

Her Children

Daily life consisted of trips to detox, picking him up at work when nobody could do anything with him and having to stand by as he hurt their children. Freedom was a luxury she did not know. For 23 years, life continued in the pattern that she had come to know as marriage. Jenny dealt with the challenges of being a mother to four, the pain of three miscarriages and the responsibility of having a son who had life-threatening illnesses. She later comes to realize that it was because of her son's illness that she landed in Halifax and that this factor played a critical role in her leaving. For a woman who had many reasons to doubt the existence of a "Higher Power", she remained strong in her faith saying that there was a reason for everything and "That is how God looks after you."

In the following quotes, Jenny gives us some insight to her situation in relation to her children:

Everybody walked on eggshells

In any other family you go to they talk and get along normally. This didn't happen in my house. Everybody walked on eggshells. My oldest daughter spent her life in her bedroom. She'd come out to eat and go back to her room. Nobody had their friends over.

...but not the daughters

We had two sons and two daughters. Well the sons could have whatever they want but not the daughters. My oldest is 27, but he would give her nothing. The sons had cars and motor bikes but my daughter was in college and we weren't up to visit her in four years. But I did whatever he said just to keep peace. But it didn't keep peace anyway, but I thought that it might. He was just so controlling and so abusive you know.

He gave
them
everything

When my daughter went to college, he didn't think she should go, but she was strong and she did. She would have nothing to do with him. My sons had too much to do with him but he bought them. He gave them everything they wanted. He gave my son who is now 24 a car when he was 16. He gave him a job and talked him into quitting school. Then he ended up in jail from the drinking and drugging and that was really hard on me.

I got
physically
ill

My son had his first surgery and then recuperated for eight weeks. Then it went into his bone and he needed another eight weeks. When he went into isolation they had a big sign put up not to let his father in. He was at such a low point any stress would affect his survival. Security had to take my husband away from the hospital. They were good to me. If he went home for three days, I hated to see him come back. My body was telling me that something was wrong. It was the first time I got physically ill just knowing he was coming back.

...a big belt
kept in the
kitchen that
people get
beat with

My daughter remembers some things, she told Children's Aid that there was a big belt kept in the kitchen that people get beat with. We had a key rack and the belt was left hanging on it. That was the only time she ever mentioned anything. The night that he abused my son she was in the next room, I didn't think she heard it, when I went in to get her, she was asleep or so I thought but she told the children's counsellor at Transition House so I guess she did hear.

I feel sorry
for my
daughter

Sometimes I think I feel sorry for my daughter because she doesn't have a dad, and I have such a wonderful one but she doesn't. Each year for father's day she comes home from school with a card and one year she gave it to my son and last year her uncle. The day her father died, I told her and she cried. She didn't have a really hard time because of it because I wouldn't let her.

She hadn't
seen her
father in
seven years

My oldest daughter has no use at all for her father. She decided not to come home to his funeral, her brother wouldn't speak to her for a year. She hadn't seen her father in seven years so she said what's the point? I think she dealt with it very well.

It appears to be very common that a woman will do for her children what she might not otherwise have the strength or courage to do for herself. Jenny came to realize that her children were very much affected by her husband's actions. This piece of Jenny's story highlights an important issue for many women who live in emotionally abusive relationships - the powerlessness which filters down to the children.

She talked of the fact that her husband would encourage her son to drink and do drugs and later drop out of school. As a parent who worked hard to try to raise her children, often without help, she spoke of the frustration of knowing she would have no say in the end. It broke her heart when her son left school at her husband's suggestion. Her daughter lived away from home for four years and in that time, Jenny was unable to visit. Control over one's wife also translates into control over the children. Her freedom was not restricted solely as a wife, but also as a mother. When women are unable to fulfill their role as protector of their children, they often make decisions and take actions that they might have otherwise thought impossible.

Estés (1992) suggests that women present a "Wild Woman" archetype which compares metaphorically with instinctual characteristics of wolves regarding their "spiritedness and their travails":

Healthy wolves and healthy women share certain psychic characteristics: keen sensing, playful spirit, and heightened capacity for devotion. Wolves and women are relational by nature, inquiring, possessed of great endurance and strength. They are deeply intuitive, intensely concerned with their young, their mates and their pack. They are experienced in adapting to constantly changing circumstances; they are fiercely stalwart and very brave. (p.2)

Most women who are in emotionally abusive relationships cannot be considered "healthy

women” in some ways and, yet, many of the characteristics outlined by Estés do apply to them. The endurance and strength that Estés points to is often demonstrated through women’s intense concern for their young. The combination of these characteristics often seems to serve as the impetus for continuing with each day or making change when danger is imminent.

Estés also points out that it is often the very same qualities posed by the “Wild Woman” archetype and wolves that make them targets and less valued:

Yet both have been hounded, harassed, and falsely imputed to be devouring and devious, overly aggressive, of less value than those who are their detractors. They have been the targets of those who would clean up the wilds as well as the wildish environs of the psyche, extinguishing the instinctual, and leaving no trace of it behind. The predation of wolves and women by those who misunderstand them is strikingly similar. (p.2)

Defining Emotional Abuse/Impact

When asked to describe emotional abuse, Jenny often referred to the lack of freedom that she had within her own life or that of her children. She recognized that she changed the person she was and had “gone into herself” during her marriage. Metaphorically, she was a prisoner in her own home. From the time she entered the prison of marriage, she handed over all that she once owned to her gatekeeper husband. She refers to her life of emotional abuse as “torture” and recognized that she was no longer free and would not experience freedom until after she had served her 23 year sentence. The following quotes were selected from Jenny’s words on the theme of identifying emotional abuse:

You lose
your own
identity

I think it is a lot of things. I think it is when someone has power over you so you lose your own identity. You are not able to think for yourself or do what you want to do. You are just not yourself because you have to please this other person. they have complete control over everything you do and everything you say.

I believed
everything
he ever told
me

When things would get bad he would say, "If you leave here, I'm going to take the kids and you won't be able to get back in" and I believed him. I believed everything he ever told me.

I was a
kind of
prisoner

Torture, prisoner, I was a kind of prisoner, I had to ask permission for everything and my younger son remembers, we had five cars, my husband was a mechanic and if I wanted to go, if you were my friend and I wanted to take you to the mall, I had to ask permission. He brings that up to me now (my son) wanting to know why did I have to ask that.

I was
accountable
for every
action

I had to ask for everything. When I went for groceries I had to make a list and when I came home, show him everything I bought and give him back the exact change, I did it. I was accountable for every action. Now I wait on everybody, I have always done it and it is hard to shake.

No
freedom, no
freedom of
speech

Well, I felt like I had to be perfect, in his eyes all the time, I had to say the right thing all the time, never talk about anything that happened in our house. The children were not allowed to either. I just had no freedom, no freedom of speech or anything else.

Barefoot
and
pregnant...
was one of
the
Commandments

I think the emotional abuse began as soon as we got married, I didn't recognize it then for what it was. You know how you have friends that you go out with, without your husband, I couldn't have that. Even if he was working and I was home that was where I was supposed to be. The saying that sounds so archaic, "barefoot and pregnant," well that was his idea of the way it was supposed to be. I think he thought it was one of the Commandments. His mother was like that so that is what he saw.

I would
have
rathered die

I knew if I did anything wrong he wouldn't put a mark on me and he often said that because he didn't want anyone to know. People all thought he was just great and so he would hurt somebody else and I would have to

hurt me

protect them. So in order to protect them, I would do whatever he wanted. Instead of physically marking me the emotional was terrible and controlling. Instead of putting marks on me, he would hurt the ones I love. I would have rathered he hurt me alone. I had no friends. That's something I never had in my life with him.

He used to beat other people and I would be there

I think that there is just as much hurt with emotional abuse as there is with physical abuse. You don't have the bruises from it but I don't think you will ever forget it. Part of my emotional abuse was when he would beat someone, not just my children, he used to beat other people, and I would be there most of the time. If I see anybody hit someone else, it comes back to me. It never leaves you. It hits me right in the stomach, you feel it. When it was him, I could not do anything about it.

You can't use your own mind

I think a part of emotional abuse is when you know that things should not be like that and you have no control over it because somebody else makes you do what they want. You can't use your own mind to an extent and you may know that this isn't the way it should be but another person won't allow it.

... That is emotional abuse

One summer, one son was in the General Hospital, one was in the Correctional Centre and my husband was in the detox Centre and my daughter was a year old, so I was really busy. I'd say all of that is emotional abuse.

I think the pain is the same

I think most of the time emotional abuse is connected to physical abuse, most of the people who would emotionally abuse people would physically abuse them too if they could. Except for the bruises, I think the pain is the same and I think it lasts longer. If you fall and get bruised it goes away, the other ones never go away, they never ever leave.

He took no part in their lives

Anything that I was involved in for myself, church, he wouldn't go to. My oldest son played hockey from the time he was seven until he was fifteen, he'd never go. He made me get my license so I could drive him and he wouldn't have to. He took no part in their lives. It's sad but it's true, he didn't.

The big word that

It is a pain from a different source. The big word that comes to me is control. It's all the power and control. It hurts when you see other people

comes to
me is
control

involved in it. After my 23 years of abuse, he controls everything, my emotions, everything you do finances, clothes, everything and it is all emotional.

It is worth
being poor

It is not very nice financially but I will survive. I don't get down about it, you do what you have to do. I am living in regional housing which is good and I was on unemployment for a year but that ran out. It is embarrassing. I had to go down and apply for social assistance, but that is minor compared to what I have been through. It is worth being poor. It is not fun, but it is worth being poor.

Like other women who describe emotional abuse, Jenny says the pain lasts longer and unlike bruises, the scars from the emotional hurt, "they never ever leave." Power and control are words that Jenny associates directly with defining emotional abuse. In terms of shaping definitions, she learned very early in the relationship that her husband was the one in control and that power could be misused. The imbalance of power and control that exists between the genders continues to serve as a weapon against women within society and within the home. The move to change the imbalance is slow on every scale and long overdue. In an article by Whitman and Murray (1992), we are reminded that "in Canada, it wasn't until 1968, when the Federal Divorce Act was passed, that physical and mental cruelty became grounds for divorce." (p.33)

"I believed him, I believed everything he said," was a phrase Jenny repeated. She kept the secrets of the family because it was the only thing she knew to do. It is only when these secrets are free to be told that women will begin to obtain symbols related to power and control, as Wolf (1993) points out:

Patriarchy's foundation has rested for millennia on the unwritten but rigorously enforced rule that women and children keep the secrets of men, and suffer abuse in silent shame. The development that breached the wall of patriarchy in the 1980s and eroded male authority was the success of the victim's -rights movement....The studies documenting these abuses were dramatized by an unprecedented development: Women and even children began to tell men's secrets. (p.18)

In the household in which Jenny and her children lived, freedom of speech was not permitted inside or out. Jenny kept the secret to herself and the children learned to do the same. Even her parents, who lived right next door, were unaware that she was a prisoner of her own home. She says that it was not until after she left that people came to realize that this was the situation. It appears that the secret, keeping itself is a very hurtful piece of this destructive force. With others not knowing the secret or those that do not helping the situation, one can come to understand why staying often appears to be the only option. The following quotes illustrate some of the reasons Jenny gave for why she stayed and why, in the end, she had no choice but to leave:

Why She Stays/Leaves

You have
to go back
home

When my husband beat my son with the belt, the police said to go to the hospital because it had to be reported and treated. I saw this doctor and I will never forget him. He showed up and said, "His father did this to him? Do you live with his father? Did they take pictures of him at the police station?" and when I said, "yes" he said, "You shouldn't have let them do that. You have to go back home and live with this man, this boy's marks will go away in a few days. You shouldn't be here and you shouldn't have gone to the police station."

No matter
what that

I said to him, "Well, I am here and what he did was wrong and I hope that the marks will go away, but I was told to come here and I am here." He

man did...
go back
there

dabbed some alcohol on the marks but they didn't go away, he had welts on his back. So, what he was saying to me was no matter what that man did go back there. It wouldn't have mattered if it had been me or my four year old daughter, I am convinced he would have said the same thing. I was appalled!!! When something like that happens to your child, you don't need courage, it is something you know you have to do and you just go and do it. For him to stand there about six feet tall, I know who he is, but to say that to me, he was dead wrong. Maybe if I was 20 years old and didn't know, but it shouldn't matter. I thought that he just thinks I am so emotionally upset that I don't know what I am doing, but here is my son black and blue. His father did it, but if the man across the street had of done it he wouldn't have said it to me, but because it was my husband, I had to live with it.

I realized
what it was
like to live
apart from
him

My son kept getting sicker and sicker. Children's Aid was going to take him but he went to stay with my mother. I went back home with my little girl. The other two were out of the house by that time, but it was just the same thing back and forth to detox. It wasn't doing a thing for him. Then my son landed in Halifax needing a liver transplant and bone marrow transplant. I left my little girl who was four at this time between her grandmother's and her uncle and aunts. I went to Halifax with my son and when I got up there I realized what it was like to live apart from him.

He told
them how
his father
treated me

When my son got there he was hysterical and he told them things that I didn't even know he realized, he told them how his father treated me and how his father wouldn't allow me to go up there with him.. They called Monday morning and said they needed me there that day so, we drove off. I had never before spoken up against my husband, well I wasn't speaking against him it was just what happened. I had never told anyone the things that he was doing. It opened the door for the conversations to take place. I realized that after I got to Transition House that there was somewhere to go and I could lock the door.

I had never
told anyone

I had never ever talked about it. The only friends I had were the people from church and I never talked to them about that. I don't think if I hadn't gone to Halifax that I ever would have. I was very reserved and I didn't talk about things. I think a part of it was shame but the other part was, if he ever found out. That was a big part. Unless I was ready to leave, I wouldn't have talked about it because I wouldn't have gone back there after talking about it.

He was
always
drunk

It got to the point where I was looking after my husband too. He was not able to do it for himself. We were in Halifax and he was always drunk. I talked to one of the doctors and they told me to take him to this clinic. They gave him these pills, they told him to go to an AA meeting. I took him on the bus and he wouldn't get off. When we got back to the lodge he was that bad, he couldn't eat, he couldn't hold anything. I went down and got him cans of peaches, anything to help him feel better. I did this for a week, I'd come home from the hospital after being there all day and one night when I got back at ten o'clock he was drunk. So that was the last time I did that. I was looking after him as if I was his mother. In his case it bothered me, if you are caring for somebody at least they can give a little bit.

I was
running
from it

The social worker said I had to do one of two things: I had to go home and make my marriage work or I had to leave because she said, "There's going to be nothing left of you." Anyway we came home, I am glad we did because I would kind of think that I was running from it and I didn't really understand how much I would have to face. Nobody would until they have to do it and I came home and faced it.

God looks
after you

The social worker gave me some ideas of things to do. I think that is how God looks after you. I don't know how I would've dealt with it because I knew I had to get out of there and I had two small kids to think about. If I hadn't, I think my son would've been dead. He had open tubes, he was so punctured, and his father had pulled out a tube. I probably would've stayed if it wasn't for my son.

My
husband
grabbed
him

I was married to him for 23 years and I shouldn't have been married for 23 days. I did believe that I couldn't leave him. I know people don't understand that but I truly believed it. When we came home after four and a half months in Halifax, it was only three days after we were back, and my son had all kinds of open tubes still in him and my husband grabbed him. I called the police and they sent me to Transition House.

I was so
ashamed
for leaving

The next week I had to go back to Halifax (we had to go every three weeks) and when I went I was so ashamed for leaving that I thought I was committing a sin because I was supposed to be married for life. I talked to an Anglican minister and I told him I felt so guilty and that maybe I shouldn't have left. He said, "you did the right thing" and I said, "Well it's against my religion." He said, "God wouldn't want you to stay there. What if you were killed?" I went to Transition House and then when I

It was life
or death
for my son

moved to Second Stage there were three families above us and we were just like sisters but I never had that.

I think the control plays a big part in whether or not you think you can leave. I think it depends on what kind of person the other person is, because my husband was violent so, say if I had enough money to get my own apartment, I never would have done that because he would tear it down to get to me. If he couldn't get to me he'd go after someone belonged to me and I didn't want that. It was life or death for my son that made me make the decision.

The shame
was gone

I always thought people wouldn't believe me. I felt that after I left, I was so used to looking after him. When you are a mother that's what comes first. After I was gone for a week, I knew it was more than that. I think after a month, the shame was gone and I think I got to see things clearly. I think it is the way you are brought up, you try to do the right thing all the time.

My body
felt
different

The biggest thing was that I had to protect the kids and I didn't know how. In Halifax I met two social workers and they made me see the difference. They made me understand, they didn't put words in my mouth, but they made me understand that the way I was living wasn't right. I am sure they could tell by looking at me. When he would be gone, my body felt different. When he would go home for three days my whole body was different, my whole body changed. I felt better about myself. I was more relaxed I guess is the right word. I think they helped me to see the difference to know what was right and wrong and then when I did decide to leave, and went to Transition House, they were wonderful.

I have
never been
back in
that house
since

I think that the most helpful thing is that I did end up in Halifax and I was there for four straight months. I slowly began to realize how much better my life was when he wasn't around. The social workers made me aware of how wrong it was, the way that I was living. One of them said, "You have to either go home and fix your marriage or don't stay married," because she said, "You have to take care of your son and you're not going to be able to do it." So, I didn't believe her. Anyway I came home and he grabbed my son by the throat and ten minutes later, I left. That was November the twenty-first, nineteen ninety-four and I have never been back in that house since.

Maybe there is a reason for everything.

There was no fixing it and I knew that, I knew that when she said it and I've never been sorry. As hard as it was for me when my son was sick and was in Halifax, I think that it is what saved my life. So maybe there is a reason for everything.

I was coming to the surface

If I hadn't had talked to the people in Halifax then I wouldn't have been able to be so open when I went to Transition House. It would have been so difficult. I had been through so much and it was coming to the surface and it still took me two more years before I actually got it out.

You are fighting for survival

Sometimes you can't see farther than your nose when you are fighting for survival and you're trying to keep everybody happy and you just can't and if you're not moving outside of that little circle, so you don't see it... my little girl was here, she was four and she couldn't spend any time with her father because he couldn't look after her so she was between my mother's and my brother-in-law's. She had never slept outside of her own bed so I was dealing with that every day and I was dealing with my son's illness and he was a mess, you know and he wasn't helping, he was definitely not helping. He was hurting matters and finally I got to realize that this was nuts, this was crazy.

Jenny described the scene when she took her son to the doctor and was told that she should not have done this nor should she have gone to the police. She was very emotional when she talked of this episode and says that she hopes to have the opportunity to tell this doctor how wrong he was in the advice he gave. Unfortunately, many women, like Jenny, encounter people in a position of authority who either offer no assistance or who encourage her to stay in the situation. This is one of many reasons why emotional abuse needs to be further understood and its impact validated.

Health care professionals are often the first, and sometimes the only, contact for a woman or child who is being abused, either physically or emotionally. Whitman and Murray (1992) point out that "60-80 percent of abused women seek professional medical

care...it is incumbent upon health care workers to be alert to the signs and symptoms of abuse so as to make an accurate diagnosis and employ appropriate intervention strategies”(p.32). Actions and interactions influence our response. Jenny’s doctor responded to her son’s beating by saying, “You shouldn’t be here and you shouldn’t have gone to the police station.” The actions of this doctor, a man in a position of power, help us to understand the messages women are sent and how these messages help her build perspective.

Jenny said that she was so deeply involved in being pulled into herself that she was unable to see clearly, “Sometimes you can’t see farther than your nose when you are fighting for survival.” The day to day challenges of keeping family secrets and attempting to “keep peace”, while also dealing with raising a family, are probably sufficient reasons why a woman stays. Added to these is the fear of what will happen to her or to her children if she leaves. It is was the protection of her son’s life that caused the shift in movement, allowing her to see more clearly. Mead refers to this in describing the stages of the social behavior in “the act” (Manis & Meltzer, 1978). In this stage of interaction, the individual begins with an impulse that leads to “disturbances in equilibrium.”

The concept of “the act” which Mead refers to, comes through defining acts of others which set up a particular goal or goals:

...acts are parts of an interlacing of previous acts, and are built up, one upon another. This is in contradistinction to the view that behavior is a series of discrete stimulus-response bonds. Conceiving human behavior in terms of acts, we become aware of the necessity for viewing any particular act within its psychosocial context. (Manis & Meltzer, p.23)

When Jenny had to spend months in Halifax because of her son's illness, she was away from her husband for extended periods of time. This shift allowed her the opportunity to see things from a different perspective. After experiencing the "disturbance in equilibrium" and having had the door opened for her through her son's disclosure to the hospital staff, Jenny began talking for the first time in 23 years. When she returned home with her son and her husband grabbed him ripping out one of her son's tubes, she made a move that was not previously possible: she found the will "to act."

Life Since She Left

Jenny spoke of the fact that leaving him did not end the emotional abuse, it just took it out of the household. After going to Transition House and then moving to Second Stage Housing, a temporary apartment complex for women who have left abusive relationships, the abuse continued. Jenny's partner continued to follow her, call her, come on the property where she was living and then burned down the family's house. She says the end really only came shortly before he died when he got ill. The following quotes represent some of Jenny's story on life since she left her husband:

I had a lot
to fear from
him

It didn't stop after I left. He chased me up to the laundromat. I couldn't talk to him, so I just left, left everything behind. He found out where my apartment was and did all kinds of things. He was charged and given six months probation for everything. I had a lot to fear from him and this went on up until two months before he died two years ago.

He would
show up

When I lived at second stage he would come on the property so I turned the alarm on. The he would show up elsewhere. He would sit on the picnic table across the street and just watch me, even though he had a girlfriend.

It feels like healing has taken place

I know it feels like healing has taken place and I know in my case, it started to take place right away. I think that deep down inside I knew I should not have been there but I didn't have the courage to leave so when I did get the courage to leave, I knew it was the right thing to do. I know it takes a long time to leave but I think that I was always working towards it. Memories are very vivid. I don't think that anything like that can leave you. I just remember things. Maybe because they were so terrible.

She could not get over the change in me

My oldest daughter came home to do her practice teaching, she could not get over the change in me. She was the first one to notice. I think it was because I didn't have to answer to him. I had to answer for every minute of the day and now suddenly I didn't. I guess you could say I had freedom but I didn't need freedom to go out, that wasn't what I needed. I just needed to have someone off my back and not have to answer for everything. My freedom of mind and speech was what I didn't have before.

It is an awfully big relief

I think that it was survival for me. I had to do that, to get by everyday. I did what I had to do, what he wanted more or less, it becomes part of what you are. I can tell you one thing, it is an awfully big relief not to have to do that anymore. When we got our first apartment it was two bedrooms and there were five of us. When we moved into another apartment it had big rooms and it was like heaven. I had never had peace. I cannot describe to you the feeling. It was not only physical space it was everything, emotional, gut feeling, physical - it was everything. It was the right thing. I had no rest from him since I left.

I actually have friends

There is not enough time to tell you how my life has changed. Completely; I don't know what else to say. I actually have friends in my life who are very good to me, good people. I am busy all the time, the kids are good. There is nothing that my daughter needs that she doesn't have because her grandmother buys her whatever she needs.

You are better off alone

I have a friend who thinks that she got what she asked for. She grew up with an abusive father and married an abusive man to get out of the house. She didn't know anything else. I think a lot of times it is important to say to women, "If that is what you are going to get the second time around, stay alone". You are better off alone.

It is a lot better to get

A woman has to feel that it is possible to get along without a man. I know some women who leave their husbands and then go with another guy who is

along with
yourself

just as bad or worse than there husband was because they don't want to be alone. I have never been alone in my life I came from a big family, I have four children, but sometimes, it is a lot better to get along with yourself for the sake of having somebody there.

He was the
boss

I can do whatever I want now, I don't have to ask anybody for permission and I never, never will and if I want to go somewhere, I can go as long as my daughter is either with me or I have a sitter for her. It's just every part of me: freedom in every way. I mean not just emotional freedom but financial freedom and everything. I don't have a boss, he was the boss.

I would've
been dead

Everybody knew what he was doing but nobody did anything about it, I was the first one to do anything about it and I expected a whole lot of flack from it but that's not what I got. I got a lot of people saying, I had two men who told me, he wouldn't be dead if I hadn't left him and you have to hold your tongue from saying, "No, I would've been dead."

You think
that this is
supposed to
be forever

Although all those terrible things happened I still carried a guilt for leaving him. His sister thought I should look after him, and I think my oldest son thought I should have stayed there to look after him. Even though they told me it was best to get out of there, part of me thought, well...I did have a bit of guilt about that. It was physically impossible for me to look after him, my sick son and a baby. When you are a catholic and married, you think that this is supposed to be forever. Maybe we should to change the Bible to a woman's edition, some new commandments would be there for sure.

Jenny spoke of the fact that she now has peace of mind and a new sense of freedom but this came with the price tag of twenty-three years. She, like so many others, does not dwell on it in the sense of pity but looks at what she has gained. She recognizes that this marriage brought her four children into her world and has taught her that there are worse things than being alone. She spoke of the fact that she is extremely cautious about all relationships now even with friends. "I think that because of what I went through I am watching every day of my life, watching out for things, sizing people up."

Even though she endured such a difficult life, Jenny said that she still carried guilt about leaving. This leads full circle to where the marriage began, when she felt guilt and shame after being raped. Perspective for Jenny was shaped a great deal by her religion and her dedication to church and the sacrament of marriage. She illustrates this when she spoke to the Anglican Minister telling him that she had committed a sin: "I was so ashamed for leaving that I thought I was committing a sin because I was supposed to be married for life." In her own family, she saw her mother and father commit to this bond for life and, to her, you did what was necessary to try to make it work. Perspectives can be influenced through interaction and, in this case, it was helpful to have an objective, outside source make observations. The Minister's comment that God would not want her to end up dead was a different perspective that she had not considered. Like most situations in which a woman is seen as attempting to make life better for herself, a certain amount of blame probably adds to the guilt she already feels: "I had two men who told me he wouldn't be dead if I hadn't left him." This, however, was their perspective and they were not living walking in her shoes or living in her thorn tree. Jenny suggests it is time for a woman's version of the bible. Perhaps one day she will write it.

Cindy's Story

When asked to talk about important relationships in her life, Cindy began where her life's story began, with a full description of her childhood and, in particular, her relationship with her mother. She says that it was years after she left home that she came to understand that this is where emotional abuse first entered her life and influenced each step she took from that point onward:

Influences as a Child

I was emotionally abused since I was a child.

Well it was quite interesting there when you said relationships because I think that a lot of women that stay in relationships, the emotional abuse didn't start in that relationship but that it was just something that they were comfortable with. I know growing up I was emotionally abused since I was a child - physical and emotionally.

The biggest impact for my abuse cycle was my mom

I guess the biggest impact for my abuse cycle I can honestly say was my mom. I loved her dearly and I think she did the best with what she had - she was a hard working woman and lived with an alcoholic and apparently me being the middle child the no one really wanted.

I still believe that I'm still fat and ugly

Today I am a single parent and not in a relationship and I think that is a big fear - you know I still believe that I'm still fat and ugly and no one would want me - so I think that the abuse from an early age from the onset carries through and it is really hard - they say physical abuse - the black eye will go away -but the emotional it scars and it scars deep and it scars hard - and I don't think it ever goes away.

She could be a caregiver to everyone else but not to me

After a while I began believing what people would say because I mean who do you trust more than your mother? You know when your mother tells you something it must be true because "mommy" said it. I can remember my mother used to take in people in my house she was always like a caregiver - but she could be a caregiver to everyone else but not to me and I mean that was like emotional abuse I couldn't understand - how can you love this person but you can't love me?

They'd say I should have aborted you

You know it's hard growing up and I mean if they hadn't told me I would have figured it out I mean I am eleven months younger than my older sister and it was probably a mistake but you know if you were brought up in love then you think well I was a mistake but they love me but when they tell you everyday "I should have aborted you or I should have killed myself and why do you think I can't stay home, it's cause you are crying all the time" and I mean all my life I was told what I was like as a baby I mean they were still using that excuse when I was twenty years old. Mom would say, "No wonder I have to get out of the house, look at you crying" and I'm not crying when I'm twenty.

I was
taught
that I was
fat ugly
and stupid

A lot of women who do get in to abusive relationships for some reason are lacking something as they are growing older and I don't know what - well I do know what it was for me, I was taught that I was fat ugly and stupid and I carried that to every relationship and it's baggage that I carry into every relationship when I left home

Every
child loves
to believe
that your
mom and
dad loves
them

Every child loves to believe that your mom and dad loves them so you're being brought up in this house where you are constantly being told things, constantly being pushed aside, constantly being corrected, constantly being told negative things about yourself and when I got into relationships or even met someone if they didn't say something I wouldn't know how to deal with that.

...the
meaner or
nastier
they were
the more I
thought
they loved
me

I had a relationship with a real nice guy for three months and I had to let him go because I didn't know how to deal with it because it was not my comfort zone. I couldn't identify it like when I was being abused I would say ok this person loves me because this is what my mom did so I identified it from my past. If someone called me names and I would get home and someone would say you're stupid well he is right because this is what I was taught. In all my relationships the meaner or nastier they were the more I thought they loved me. The more beatings I took, well this person really loves me because this is what I know.

...you do
everything
you can to
please that
person so
that they
will stay

The screaming and hollering and being told (a lot of it was my weight) that there was something wrong with you and being called a nut. Then you get in a relationship and someone says there is something wrong with you - oh my God there are the words I know - so yeah I am a nut and there is something wrong with me and then you are comfortable with that and you do everything you can to please that person so that they will stay because that is what you are used to and the more abuse I took the more I believed that ok this person does care about me, does love me and I am sure that in my sick own mind I loved them because I stayed.

There
were eight
of us
...seven
would get
snacks

I can remember at times supper times, growing up, I was not allowed to have supper because I had eaten breakfast. I wasn't allowed two meals a day because I was so big. I can remember there were eight of us and we'd be going to bed and seven would get snacks but I didn't because it would just turn to fat. I could never have a birthday or a party or anything because mom would say I'd just eat the whole cake and blow up.

My God

When my first husband had physically dislocated my daughter's shoulder,

you know
I couldn't
believe
that my
mother
would
abuse me

and she wasn't even thirteen months old, and I went to transition house they said, "were you being abused," and I said, "Well he hit me you know but not tonight" and they talked about emotional abuse and I said, no I never went through that - no I didn't have emotional abuse because if I said I did I would have to say that I had that since I was a kid and my God you know I couldn't believe that my mother would abuse me - when she hit me it was because she was upset with my dad or one of the kids and you hear that you take out everything on the one you love and so I was the one who got it all..

She would
never buy
me clothes
because
she was
ashamed

I mean she would never buy me clothes because she was ashamed to go and buy that size clothes and she would say things to me like I remember prom night I wanted to go to the prom and I didn't care if I was going alone or not but she told me I couldn't go if I didn't have a guy to go with and she told me well you'd have to get a gown made because you would never get one big enough to fit you and she'd say little things like we'd have to hire Omar the tent maker to come and make you a gown and you know I'd go upstairs and I'd cry.

I couldn't
wait to
leave the
house

I couldn't wait to leave the house but I didn't want to leave getting married, I really didn't want to get married but I was told I had to. You know this was my last chance and of course, I took my last chance because I wanted to get out of that house. It was so bad growing up and everybody I got close to, for some reason or another my mother would abolish the friendship.

She only
hits me
because
she loves
me

Why does she keep going back to him, he beats her once a week? As a child, a child's love for their parent is unconditional, I don't think it changes that much when they become adults, the child's love for the parent whether male or female is unconditional, so if mother or father kicks the child and then later on cuddles them and says I am sorry if that happens enough the child is going to think she hit me but she love me, she only hits me because she loves me, so you grow up insecure with low self esteem because you don't understand all of this hitting and this abuse.

I hear Cindy's story and I try to relate to the world she knew as a child. I can think of only one thing that we had in common- we both had mothers. Symbolic interactionism illustrates how we shape our understanding based on our lived experience and the interpretations we give that living. Cindy's interpretation very much reflects life as

she knew it, as a child who was told that she should have been aborted. As an adult, she lives the consequences of the formative years and very much reflects the line "We cease loving ourselves if no one loves us." (Madame De Stael, cited in Maggio, 1992, p.285)

It is not surprising that Cindy would expect that she deserved very little in life when this was the message she received from the people who were supposed to love her the most. I was taken by her line "Who do you trust more than your mother?" I can relate to her on this point and recognize that, as vulnerable children and young women, we are so dependent on our parents and, perhaps, particularly our mothers. It is at this point that paths divide among families and learning what is normal varies within every house on the block. As one lives an experience, it is often assumed that every household is living the same.

Within this portion of Cindy's story, it is recognized that she was robbed of the basic necessities of love and being valued at an early age. She learned to compensate for that in many ways and later tells of how she would take the blame for everything even when it was not hers. The line "I loved her dearly" strikes me hard as I realize that Cindy is living proof that "the child's love for the parent, whether male or female, is unconditional." I often wondered what it would be like to meet this kind of mother, how I would react to her and how Cindy could continue to love her? Then I realized I was placing my judgments and my standards on her life. This is not appropriate for interactionist research. In the end, I did meet Cindy's mother, and I felt sorry for her that something in her life must could possibly lead her to this place that was so destructive for Cindy. I wondered what her childhood had been like and thought about how vicious is the cycle that seeps from generation to generation in unhealthy homes.

I got the feeling my mother was trying
to live her life through me, only I wasn't
doing a good enough job...She used
love like a Club.
(Love, 1990, p.16)

Love examines the role parents play in the lives of their children and how children become the victim of what she calls emotional incest. She explains that children play different roles including surrogate spouse, left out child, chosen child and so on, but regardless of the role, there are consequences that are long lasting. Cindy was often confused about exactly what her role was as a child and later says that her mother today tells her she was her favorite. To many this seems like a strange way of showing favoritism or love, but it was a lesson Cindy learned early and a lesson she learned she carried with her as entered relationships in her life.

Weight

A theme which came up over and over again for Cindy was that of her weight, as a child and as an adult. When she was 25 she had surgery to have her stomach stapled. This is a very serious operation which can have negative long term effects. She said she was willing to take the chance to do anything to try to loose the weight. From the time she was four or five she remembers being made aware of her weight through things her mother would say to her and things that happened in school. She said she might have been able to handle being over weight if someone at home had made her feel good about herself; instead, they were contributing to her insecurity.

Friedman (1997) writes of the importance of building confidence in young women who are dealing with issues regarding weight, particularly during the early school years. As Cindy was describing some of the things her mother said to her and how she felt as they put her on a scale in school in front of the rest of her class, I was reminded of the pressures of being a child and adolescent. In one's life, it seems that the things that stick out the most are those things that are said that hurt us. One negative comment from the person you have a crush on or from a teacher you admire and your confidence can be shattered. As a person who received continuous positive regard from my family, I still had insecurities. It is difficult to think about Cindy's life with such little support in place for her and the added insecurity of her weight. Wolf (1991) outlines how serious the issue of body image has become to women and how it has come to be that so much emphasis is inappropriately assigned to this issue:

In the regressive 1950s, women's natural fullness could be briefly enjoyed once more because their minds were occupied in domestic seclusion. But when women came en masse into male spheres, that pleasure had to be overridden by an urgent social expedient that would make women's bodies into the prisons that their homes no longer were. (p.184)

Wolf outlines the historical advances of women in terms of feminism and how these advancements are counter-balanced by the current preoccupation with trying to fit women's bodies into a shape that has been determined by a political agenda. With a 1985 survey reporting that 90 percent of respondents (women) think they weigh too much and 25 percent of women being on diets, it appears that agenda is being met. A high school

survey reported that by age thirteen, “53 percent of young women were unhappy with their bodies; by age eighteen and over this had risen to 78 percent” (Wolf, p.185).

Wolf contends that this shift in concern for weight must be understood as “a direct solution to the dangers posed by the women’s movement and economic and reproductive freedom” (p.197). She claims that dieting became a “potent political sedative in women’s history.” Researchers confirmed what most women know too well - “That concern with weight leads to a ‘virtual collapse of self-esteem and sense of effectiveness.’ He found that ‘Prolonged and periodic caloric restriction resulted in a distinctive personality whose traits are passivity, anxiety and emotionality.’” (Wooley & Wooley, cited in Wolf, p.187)

It is probably not the case that Cindy’s mother or partners had a “political agenda” in mind as they continued to erode Cindy’s feeling of worth through her weight. Her mother did, however, fall into a trap that society condones in terms of shaping people into a preconceived mold instead of allowing that person to take her own shape. Cindy was not fitting the mold her mother had conceived for her, and in the end, Cindy concluded she would be just what her mother said she would be, “fat and ugly.” As her partners used her weight as a weapon of hurt and destruction, Cindy’s lack of self-worth continued to be weighed in pounds.

These are some of Cindy’s words on the issue of weight:

I knew the words that really hurt about my weight

I never had a birthday cake until a couple of years ago. That was fattening, “Gees, you give Cindy a cake and she’ll eat the whole thing herself.” So, nobody would buy me a cake. ...I knew the words that really hurt about my weight and that was my biggest problem when I was growing up and a few other things that I had discovered...but one of them was my weight and I remember I used to walk down the street and think that everybody was laughing at me.

I would start a diet and she would bake pies and cookies and cakes all night long

I was that paranoid about my weight and even when I tried to diet my mother would say what are you doing that for you know that you aren't going to stick to it. Every time that I started a diet...and this was another thing that I found out was abuse and I didn't know it was you know my mom was great and everything but it seemed like as I got older in my teens and I didn't like my body I would start a diet and she would bake pies and cookies and cakes all night long - the things I like and before long sure I'd be sitting at the kitchen table eating a whole pie for breakfast. and I would say to myself why even try - because you are just going to be fat - it was in my genes - and I started then listening and believing that - and I think that is why when you get in a relationship you believe it - you believe everything that is coming.

I weighed 202 pounds in grade 6 and everybody laughed

I have pictures, they have pictures at home that growing up until about four or five I started putting weight on and this is how it so impacted on me that in grade six we had a health nurse come in the classroom to talk to you and check your eyes and hearing and everything and I got on the scale in front of my classmates and I weighed 202 pounds in grade six and everybody laughed - and it got to the point that and if people were encouraging me and I had a positive outlook on it maybe it wouldn't have been so bad - but I wouldn't even take gym because I was ashamed of my body because of the weight and it became a real big problem in my late years by the time I was 24 I weighed close to 400 pounds so of course I believed what they said and so I just kept eating because that was who I was and in turn I started to drink and drug - just to escape reality.

I wasn't allowed to eat it because I was fat enough

There was one special person in my life and on one of my birthdays, she came home with a beautiful cake, heart-shaped cake for my birthday and my mother made her take it back so what she did was she just took it to another house and gave it to that family. I wasn't allowed to eat it because I was fat enough. "What are you going to do, she's going to blow up, she can't eat anymore."

My mother said to shut my mouth and keep walking

Yes and I know back to the weight thing that I was overweight. I was told all my life that I was fat and ugly and when I got married to my first husband walking up the aisle I was crying and my father said why are you crying "I don't want to marry this man" and my mother said I wouldn't find anyone else because of the weight and to shut my mouth and keep walking.

My

When I got married my husband would tell me "I don't know why I married

husband
would tell
me I don't
why I
married
you, you
are so fat

you, you are so fat." He'd say, you don't know how to do this or that and all my life was like that - every partner I was with. I met a man that loved big women and ah he really did you know, he liked big women and I had an operation and I started losing weight and this man never like emotionally abused me till later on but when I started losing weight he started using simple words that he would say to me you know that would really hurt. He came home drunk one night and beat the face off of me and I'd fight back and the next day its all over except for the bruises and that but he came one night and said my Jeess hon you've lost a lot of weight - too bad its just hanging...and that to this day still rings in my ears and so if I'm ever with someone and start to undress I'm just picturing that I'm hanging right...

"Look at
the look of
you, look at
the size of
you ...I
don't want
anyone to
know that
you are
with me

When we went out to drink, I was to go to the bar with him but I was to leave him alone and when he got drunk enough he would start telling me "look at the look of you, look at the size of you ...I don't want anyone to

know that you are with me" and it was my husband and it got to a point that he'd say you go your way and I'll go mine - you go drink and I'll do what I want and he would want to be around other people but not me and it was constant - he always had someone in the house whether it was a brother or an uncle - he always had to be with somebody else - he was ashamed to be with me and it wasn't until I got out of the marriage that I realized it.

I believed
that I
didn't
deserve
anybody

The night we broke up he said don't expect a fight from me, good riddance, you're fat let somebody else have you and that was the way I left and by that time I was paranoid to the limit about my weight. I believed that I didn't deserve anybody and at times, not only did I believe it, but I knew it. What was the use in trying to socialize because I'm not going to get anyone? There is no way that anyone would ever be interested in me so that affected the relationships I sought right up through life - I mean you have the size.

I hated
looking in
the mirror,
I hated me

When I carried this into my relationships it was the same and what came out of it was a lot of paranoia. To get rid of some of this I went in and had the operation, lost in a year 100 pounds and everyone is telling me how good I look - but I don't feel it - I don't feel it I went from a 44 jeans to a 32 but I hated looking in the mirror, I hated me and that took a lot, a lot of courses, programs and everything to finally say I like me.

Cindy was made to feel that she was undeserving of food, men or equal treatment, and she often linked this directly to her weight. Walking up the aisle crying because she did not want to marry this man and having her mother tell her to “shut up and keep walking” reveals a great deal about her family situation. In considering why women stay in emotionally abusive relationships, it seems that for someone like Cindy, the message was made clear straight from her mother. Gwartney-Gibbs (1987) discusses the many influences, particularly of parents and peers, who help shape decision making regarding choosing partners. Cindy was told that this would probably be her last chance to find someone and she should take whatever she could get. Hearing this from the person “you trust the most,” her mother, it seems the stage was set for her to accept an unhealthy relationship without complaint. Cindy said, “I didn’t want to marry him, I only learned his middle name when they read our vows.”

Cindy makes it clear when she speaks of her mother that a child’s love is unconditional. One has to wonder why she was not offered the same in return. Where was the unconditional love when Cindy began developing a weight problem? Hearing that her mother would purposefully make this struggle more difficult by baking all night and depriving her of food at other times demonstrates a mixed message which does not appear in keeping with unconditional love. Even after losing a great deal of weight, Cindy could not lose the emotional scars that were beyond healing and says, no matter what, she still feels 400 pounds. The weight she carries now is not one of physical pounds but of scar tissue that could never heal regardless of weight loss. Friedman (1997) points out:

Some of us feel fat only occasionally and some of us feel fat a lot. Sometimes we encode so many of our feelings and experiences in the language of fat that it seems as if it is the only language we speak. We become so preoccupied with what feeling fat means to us that we are fail to address the issues that lie underneath. (p.46)

Cindy says she found other ways to escape from the pain she was feeling and, at an early age, turned to alcohol and drugs. These forms of escape would take their own emotional toll, but seemed to her to be at least a temporary relief. She would later face serious battles with both of these addictions and recognizes that she was not even capable of seeing the emotional abuse in her life while she was escaping through her addictions.

When it came to having children, Cindy prayed that her child would not be a baby girl because she had learned a lesson about life through her own experience; girls do not get treated very well. Hearing the words from her own childhood, Cindy feared for her baby girl: "I didn't want her to be fat, I didn't want her to be ugly." She said, "I didn't want her to go through what I went through."

Her Partners

Cindy had two partners. Both relationships were emotionally and physically abusive. Cindy explains that her partners would have other girlfriends, call her names and physically hurt her, but she would accept that this was all a part of what defined love from what she had been taught. She would accept what others might not have endured, as long as her partner would come back or stay with her. The question of her leaving or wanting

to leave never seemed to be the issue, it was always her challenge to try to do whatever was necessary to get him to stay. It appears that the need to do this never provided her with the option of considering how badly she was being treated or that she could possibly expect or want more for herself.

The following are selections from Cindy's words on the partners in her life:

I'd have to sit down and cry all night or drink to get away from the pain.

Now when I got into a relationship with my first husband to me what was said to me as a child growing up and how it affected me that was normal - so when I get into a relationship things that are said - they hurt - and I couldn't understand why they hurt but it was normal and things that he would say and things that my mother would say growing up through my adolescence and everything - the things that were said they hurt - but I couldn't understand why they hurt because they were things that were embedded in me and something I believed - I truly believed it but I couldn't understand how I'd have to sit down and cry all night or drink to get away from the pain.

He beats me and I mean that's ok because he loves me

You look for a relationship with something you know that seems comfortable, that it seems the way life should be, when you get into a relationship and he hits you and he is going to say that he's sorry because he is scared of the law, the courts and everything else he says he is sorry, it works out, two weeks later you are hit again, it's getting a little worse now so he must love me more, he's hitting me a little worse, he runs around on me, he beats me and I mean that's ok because he loves me, because that is your idea of what unconditional love is.

Ma said I would never find somebody else who was going to want me

When it came time for me to have partners in my life at first I did what everyone expected me to do - I met someone and I mean he seemed interested so within six months we were married and Ma really pushed that because like she said I would never find somebody else who was going to want me - "he's here so you better take him now." He was 11 years older than me and we had nothing in common except for drinking the two of us liked to drink and I didn't even know him.

My partner said things that would just cut like

..but no one can really explain what they feel like, I mean the slash in the heart and the crying, I mean I had a partner that emotionally said things that would just cut like a knife and you know he would have multiple partners, he would be living with me and going with other women and that all hurt

I was stupid
anyway

too, I mean the physical when it came and then you just get to a point where you say what the hell is the use of it all? I came home one night and my partner had his new girlfriend in my house, in my bed and before the night was over he had me totally believing that I didn't see what I saw because I was stupid anyway, I blow things out of proportion and after a while you think maybe I didn't see it, maybe it didn't happen

Why was
this man
trying to
hurt his
own child?

I know my first husband the abuse was there all along the emotional abuse but when I found out I was pregnant with the baby, that was when the physical abuse started and that hurt me because why was this man trying to hurt his own child? The physical, kicking me in the stomach and it wasn't that I cared if I bruised or not but it was oh my God this man is trying to hurt his own child, he must really hate her or hate the child because of its mom.

I always
thought he
wasn't an
abuser

I would think if he was with someone else he wouldn't be abusing that woman and I always thought that he wasn't an abuser and it was just the fact that he was with me and that was why he did it. If he was with somebody else he wouldn't do that because growing up Ma never abused another child, she had eight of us at the end of it and she treated them all very good to the point that she never hit them or called them names you know she had big ideas for every one of her children except for me.

That's what
I did to
deserve that

So that is why in other relationships I just kept saying it's me ...if he was with someone else he would definitely not do that. With my first partner, although he liked big women, once I started losing the weight everything went nuts. Again it was me, it was my fault, everything was my fault no matter what ..if they decided to go out and get drunk and smash the car it was my fault and that was always the question and still is today. It's the same for anyone who is being abused, what did I do to cause that and no matter what happened. I'd have to go through those steps and I would find out what happened - oh ok, that's what I did to deserve that, and it could be something that happened weeks down the road, but it was my fault.

No matter
what the
mean
saying was
for that
day...

I brought those thoughts into my relationships so when the men would say something mean to me, I would think well this is right, this is normal and sometimes it was about my weight and sometimes it was about my housework or sometimes it was about how I raised my children, and no matter what the mean saying was for that day, it's ok, they must still love me because they were putting me down or saying this.

He threw
my
daughter
and that
was why I
got out

When I got out of my first marriage it was because he threw my daughter against a wall and dislocated her shoulder, and that was why I got out . The second one was common law - he left on his own for some reason or other and I just decided - I mean he left 30 or 40 times a month - he'd come home and get his needs met, eat, shower and get money and then I'd be there thinking if I give them money, they might love me, if I give my whole cheque to them - I worked as a waitress and all my tips I would give to him so he'd be happy and he would love me and he would go out drinking and drugging and be with someone else but I'd think at least he loves me because he would eventually come home to me.. I really believed that and I don't know if that part had anything to do with my growing up but I know that the signs of abuse started with my growing up and it just escalated from there and it just got worse no matter what.

I'm keeping
the unit
together
and
everything
is the way
it's
supposed to
be

I started making up a scenario for myself saying its ok as long as he comes home to me and that's when I started feeling well I'm fat anyway so he can go out and have somebody else but he comes home to me then its ok cause I'm keeping the unit together and everything is the way its supposed to be. And that is what I accepted...even today, my last partner was in a relationship with somebody else while he was with me and I totally accepted it, I allowed it, I allowed this person to go and visit this other woman and stay there all night and he'd say well I slept on the couch and I'd believe them ...but you must love me because the next day you're back at my house. I guess I was just looking for somebody to care about me.

He took the
cue stick
and hit me
across the
head with it
to prove to
her that he
loved her
more than
me

My last relationship, my last long-term relationship was like, you know (pause) he was always going out with another woman and he told me, he had me believing that it was my fault. They would call me and I would sit on the phone and I'd hang up the phone and I'd cry and I'd cry cause he'd tell her, "It's all right to call her, I'd slap her if she said anything to you." I can remember one time that a woman came to my house and I thought that she was my real good friend and we became friends and one day, I was going out and I went down to her place to see if she wanted to come for a coffee and when I walked into her house, my husband's picture and my baby was on the fridge. I took it off the fridge and I read the back of it and it had her name to, and Love, Joe. Then I found out that he was sleeping with her and at that time we went down to a bar that he was at and I confronted him and she confronted him because I think that she was at the point where she had to know what was going on. He took the cue stick and hit me across the head with it to prove to her that he loved her more than me. I was carried out in an ambulance and taken to the hospital. While I was in the hospital he came home but it was because she put him out, but I always thought that it was because he loved me, that's why he came back to

What's for
supper,
bitch?"

me and never once did I think that maybe the other woman had enough of this, maybe they were smart enough to see what was going on. But no... I always thought he came back because he loved me. And the next day the abuse would start and it wouldn't be two days that he'd be back in the house and he would have my daughter calling me names and she'd only be about five years old. She'd come out and say, "What's for supper, bitch?" and I'd start making supper and doing what I was supposed to.

I just said.
He didn't
mean it

Like I said, that was pure physical abuse when I got the cue stick across, you know, split my head, my ear, the whole bit, I was embarrassed by it, you know the emotion was high and when I got to the hospital, I just said, "He didn't mean it," you know how could he not mean to hit me with the cue stick when he did. How do you explain it to your family? Once I got involved with this guy - he was really a bad abuser - my family disowned me.

I started
believing he
had every
right to be
ashamed of
me.

It wasn't long after that and probably even previous that he would say things to me like, "I don't know why I ever married you, you're fat and ugly" and he got into the same kind of routine that my mother had - but he was my husband now and I would say to him let's go out tonight and he would say no but if he started drinking and got half corned then he would go out with me. It was as if he was ashamed of me and I started believing he had every right to be ashamed of me.

I should be
just damn
lucky that
there is
somebody
in my life

He'd be gone 5 or 6 hours and I'd think he found someone else because my mother always told me this is your last chance, he'll find someone else, you'd better get this done. I know that in my relationships with the men, the physical abuse with the second guy he had a new girlfriend every weekend and he lived at my place and he would have no problem telling them you can call me at home cause it is my sister I am living with and it was his partner and they would call the house at 11:00 and it got to the point where I would think it's not that bad, having a partner that runs around on you it's not that bad cause you're not getting beaten up not getting hit, not getting whacked and eventually they must love me because they always come back, I didn't know it was because I was supplying everything, the room, the food, the smokes and with the way that I was growing up and everything, that I should be just damn lucky that there is somebody in my life.

The Hite report (1987) sheds light on just how many women report being unhappy in their relationships with men. The report, based on interviews with a total of 4,500 women, has some alarming statistics and testimonies indicating just how many women are in relationships that are not providing important components of a partnership. Sixty-four percent of the women surveyed said the love they receive is not satisfying to them and 89 percent felt torn between men's demand for love, their "duty" to be giving and supportive of others and their need to have time for their own thoughts and ideas (Hite, p.824).

For Cindy, considering the idea of having her own thoughts and ideas does not seem to have been an option. While she felt the pain of the "slash in the heart and the crying", it does not appear that leaving was considered. Having been told since she was a child that she was undeserving, Cindy stayed. By staying, however, the process of continued destruction to her self-esteem took place. Being told that, "I should never have married you" or knowing that your partner wanted to hurt your unborn child might have caused others to want to leave, but in the context of Cindy's life, it was all in keeping with her self-image and what she thought she deserved.

Cindy's perceptions were not skewed; the life she had lived and was living were being very appropriately interpreted. She had her own life's dictionary that defined "unconditional love" through examples she'd known since she was a child. The page had been marked for her and she knew it well. "Two weeks later he hits me again, it's getting a little worse now so he must love me more; he's hitting me a little worse; he runs around

on me; he beats me and I think that's ok because he loves me, because that is your idea of unconditional love." (Cindy)

Even when women are being emotionally hurt by their partners, they seem to feel an obligation to try to meet their emotional needs. The Hite report revealed that 87 percent of women felt men were more emotionally dependent than women after the first few months of marriage. Eighty-one percent of women said that men tell them or imply to them that there is "something wrong with them" when they are not "loving" and "giving." Another 62 percent of women describe their reaction to men's emotional harassment and aggression, mixed at the same time with men's demand for love and nurturing, as emotional confusion. (Hite, 1987, p.828)

Trying to enter Cindy's world of living with a man who could be so hurtful in both physical and emotional ways involves entering her world at childhood. The progression seems to make more sense when considered from the fullness of her lived experience. Her position from a very early age seemed to be to accept that she deserved nothing and to be grateful if she somehow got thrown anything more. According to the Hite report, many women are living in relationships considered to be unhealthy or at the very least unhappy, but many stay just the same. For Cindy, leaving was not considered as an option and today she says, "I would probably still be with him if he hadn't left me."

Defining Emotional Abuse/Impact

Earlier in this document, a textbook definition was given for the term "emotional abuse" with the intent that a further understanding of this definition would come from

those who have created their own definition through lived experience. Cindy discussed what emotional abuse meant to her and used words such as “shame”, “hiding” and “scars”. As a person who experienced both physical and emotional abuse, she says the two cannot be separated but “the black eye will go away - but the emotional scars, it scars deep, and it scars hard - and I don’t think it ever goes away.” (Cindy)

The following quotes are selected portions of Cindy’s definition of emotional abuse and the impact that it presents:

When somebody says something nice to me I could cry

It’s still uncomfortable, it’s very uncomfortable to have anybody say anything positive about me, my head goes down and I could cry. When somebody says something nice to me I could cry and I don’t know what it is, it is foreign, why am I crying, am I happy, it is because it is something I might have needed when I was five instead of 35, I don’t know what to do with it, who does right?

They would be looking for another woman while I’m there

...and so it does it stops my social life and it stops me a lot from living. I’m just doing what I have to and looking after what I have to but not really going out and enjoying life... In my relationships with men, they would be looking for another woman while I’m there with them... it hurts, it hurts real badly.

The shame that you carry

That was normal I didn’t think that abuse was anything until the physical and that came with my first child but I think and I believe I started a lot of fights but there must have been something that had me to the point where I had to strike out and I didn’t know it was because of all the stuff that is said to you and the shame that you carry when you’re told something like that so you drink and it angers you - it just boils up inside you then the shame comes and then you know that relationship isn’t going to work.

That was just the way I was brought up

I wasn’t looking at other things like my alcohol or drugs you know it got to a point where my daughter was born. When my first daughter was born I didn’t want a girl. I didn’t want another me to grow up . If I had a little boy in my family there were three girls and 5 boys and the boys were treated very good - I figured girls don’t get treated that way so I should have a boy.

You either had to hide it or you had to lie about it

There were a lot of times when my feelings were hurt

I don't think it ever goes away

The shame and the guilt and of course that's abuse all over

It isn't as though they

I think that was my biggest problem with my getting into relationships and I wouldn't even look at my other fears and everything, my other abuses but I didn't know I wasn't quite sure what was mental abuse what was physical abuse what was emotional abuse, I didn't know because that was just the way I was brought up.

A lot of people say that they would rather physical abuse than emotional abuse and at one point I thought it too. If you beat me then that showed me that you loved me for some sick reason. At the end of it, with every act of physical abuse for a woman comes emotional abuse. I mean it is ok for your husband or your partner or your parents or whoever to hit you or blacken your face or blacken your eyes or bruise you up but that is the physical part. It's afterward when people say, "my jeez what happened to you?" that was the emotional abuse. I mean you either had to hide it or you had to lie about it and then you're hurt, you are deeply hurt, I really believe that physical abuse is just the long term of emotional abuse because it starts there.

I had my own ways to escape that and I would use them a lot. I got into two relationships later on it got to a point that the abuse... you see if someone physically abused me - its a sick way of thinking but if you hit me I could hit you back and that way I didn't feel so bad but there were a lot of times when my feelings were hurt when I was told things that I started to believe and I would go into my bedroom and cry and nobody could see and this way - and I couldn't understand that this was hurting me more than the physical abuse because I didn't now that this was abuse - I really believed what people told me.

They say physical abuse - the black eye will go away -but the emotional it scars, it scars deep, and it scars hard - and I don't think it ever goes away.

A lot of people misconceive physical abuse and say I'd rather get punched in the face and say well but every woman who says that really doesn't mean it because I've gone that root. I've had the punches in the face and I went to college with a black eye and the shame and the guilt and of course that's abuse all over again although the night before I got the punch in the face its the two weeks later that I have to explain and hide it from the kids and you know..

So they may really be saying I'd rather take the physical than the emotional

can be
separated

and yet the physical brings with it automatically the emotional so it isn't as though they can be separated that way.

And wham
right in my
face

When I got out of all the relationships and it was all gone I can remember a friend of mine came into my house and she said, "oh my God you need a shovel to get in here" and wham right in my face and all - everything and I think a lot of that came from the emotional abuse and I mean you hear it for so long that you just don't want to do it anymore but that is just the way you are the way you turn out ...but...PAUSE no one can really explain what they feel like, I mean the slash in the heart.

Because
of the
emotional
abuse I
went
through
growing up,
alcohol
became my
problem

There needs to be a list of questions to identify emotional abuse. A lot of women are physically abused, so does your partner hit you at certain times or does your partner call you down or make fun of you? Does your partner leave you for weekends and then come back or try to control you in certain ways? I am sure a bunch of smart women can get together and try to do something like that. I totally believed that alcohol was not my problem and because of the emotional abuse I went through growing up, alcohol became my problem, alcohol is only a symptom, once I dealt with all the abuse I had growing up, alcohol is not a problem anymore. I can't say that I could never sit down and have a drink or two but I know that I have dealt with that much in my life that maybe I just don't want to drink anymore, I got to a point where I like myself enough that I don't want to sit down and get loaded anymore, I may sit down and have a drink but I don't want to sit down and get loaded I don't have that pain to take away.

I just
couldn't
understand
why I
needed to
cry
constantly

That's what it became, used to pain, pain I couldn't understand, like if I stepped on a piece of glass I had pain, I knew what it was from, if I fell down a flight of stairs, I had pain, I knew what it was from childbirth -same thing, when somebody hit me, I had pain, I knew what it was from but I just couldn't understand why I needed to cry constantly, why I didn't like me, why I hated me. Why I wouldn't go out to a store and buy a new set of clothes, why I was afraid to make a friend because my friend at that time would make fun of me, it came to a point where I would be in a crowd drinking and I would make fun of me first. I would say something very rude, very out of the way about myself and then they would all laugh and would feel comfortable and they figured they could talk about me and they would but that was okay because I laughed with them and really I laughed at me, I didn't understand why I did that. I didn't understand a lot in life, nobody taught me. Emotional abuse should be taught in the schools.

I feel like I
am
something
very insigni-
ficant

I have this favorite saying that I feel like I am always the lowest person on the totem pole. The totem pole can be anywhere from three feet to twenty but that's how low I feel. Something so close to the ground that no matter what goes on in my life everything else comes first. I feel like I am something very insignificant something that you would build on - something like a snake comes to mind because it is low in the grass, it's unnoticeable and it can change like a chameleon and I always felt that that was me. Unless I was drunk and then you would notice me. I've seen people come into a room and look around and say oh no one is here. I feel like I take the shape of the wall or the colors and what they mean is you're not important enough to notice and that is the way it always was.

They want
to shame
you into
changing

Emotional abuse sounds like they actually care, they don't like something about you and they want to shame you into changing. Emotional abuse is your partner or your parent wanting something different, they want you in the mold that they see for you, they want you to do what they want and not to be yourself. If you are doing something, they are making fun of you by putting you down, calling you names or running around on you.

Nobody can
mend a
broken soul

You see a woman who eats herself into oblivion - that's the only thing she's known, it's a disorder but it's also the way that she takes her pain away just like the alcoholic woman or the drug abuser - they have found something that is going to take the emotional abuse away. A cast can help a broken arm or a cold cloth can fix a swollen eye but nobody can mend a broken soul and that's what it is -it breaks the soul. You become the low part of society. You walk around just making sure you don't bang into anybody and you try to make your way in the world and you become somebody that - like myself I got a college degree but so what? What is the use of that? I never felt that I was ever capable of working. I wouldn't be able to work in a place like here because I was worthless. I was always told that I was stupid so I didn't know how to deal with any issues and wouldn't even try.

Cindy attempted to define emotional abuse through the pain it brought. She could grasp stepping on glass, childbirth, being hit or falling down stairs but the silent pain that came from needing to cry all the time was hard for her to comprehend. She said it was hard to define and she could not understand why she hated herself. She made fun of herself before someone else did, and abused herself when there was no one else to do it.

She says that more people need to be made aware of the definition of this form of abuse and that young people should learn about it in school.

A metaphor is an important technique for painting a picture which provides a clearer understanding for the reader and Cindy uses them well in her definition. This figure of speech, which is a commonly used component of interactionist works, is defined by Shaw (1986) as “a method of using words out of their literal, or ordinary sense, in order to suggest a picture or image” (p.251). Cindy uses metaphors in a very concrete manner to describe her definition of emotional abuse. She says she is “the lowest person on the totem pole” and “something very insignificant that you would build on.” She says she is a snake that is low in the grass, unnoticeable and capable of changing like a chameleon

Through the use of metaphors, Cindy enriches our understanding of emotional abuse by bringing it from an abstract concept to a concrete picture. I do not know what “slashes to the heart” feel like although I can try to imagine this abstract feeling. Hearing the words, “something like snake...because it is low in the grass” paints a clear image for me of how she sees herself. Coupled with the vision of “lowest person on the totem pole,” it is becoming clearer how the definition is being applied and what impact it has had on Cindy. She illustrates this further when she describes being in a room and having people walk in and say, “no one is here.” In measuring self worth, Cindy’s scale is weighed down by those who seem to be walking over her or crushing her without notice.

Definitions are a critical component of interactionist work, as one attempts to understand the meaning given to any particular object or feeling. Meanings are applied

based on our experiences and the interpretation we give those situations. Cindy's ability to clearly define emotional abuse metaphorically is an indication of "lived experience." She can define the abuse so clearly because it has become a part of the definition of who she is, after having experienced it. She does not overlook the sound of the thorn bird, she understands both the pain and the beauty of its cry.

Why She Stays/Leaves

The question of why a woman stays in an emotionally abusive relationship is central to this study and serves as an important factor in understanding how to attempt to assist women who face this situation. There are some who believe that women should stay in a relationship and try to make it work at any cost. Others believe that if a woman stays in that kind of relationship, there is something wrong with her or somehow she is deserving of what she gets. Many people do not consider the actual impact of emotional abuse and it is not seen as abuse, for example, in terms of the law. Even women reporting physical abuse are still struggling hard to have this deemed criminal when the perpetrator is a partner.

Over the years of working with battered women, I have come to understand a common feeling which exists among those who live this nightmare: It is often safer to stay. For many, there are no options. In Nova Scotia, many women have been killed by partners who were unwilling to accept that she would leave. From a study of homicides of intimate partners in Nova Scotia, Mahon (1995) points out:

The key element was the man's belief that he owned the woman in the relationship and he had the right to keep her in the relationship until he decided it was over. If he decided to leave she could not challenge his authority in the relationship. If she decided to leave he felt he had the right to use force to get her back. The men's control and violence against the women escalated after the turning point to the homicide. (p.6)

In Cape Breton within the past few years, one woman was shot in her driveway, another was stabbed in her apartment, while a third young mother of two was stalked by her ex-partner and then stabbed to death. Women like Jane Stafford have taken matters in their own hands when they feared a loved one. The story of her abuse and the emotional torture she suffered was unbearable for many to read, unthinkable to live. Jane, like so many others, stayed because she felt she had no other choices. Cindy stayed because she believed she deserved what she got and did not know that there was another way of living.

In doing research on a topic such as this, it becomes critical that judgment is suspended so that it does not interfere with being open to understanding the reality of another's experience. It might be difficult for many people to hear Cindy's story of how her husbands destroyed her with words and mistreated their relationship and yet she did nothing to leave. Her husband set the apartment on fire while Cindy was pregnant, thinking that she was still inside. Yes, Cindy left for some time after this happened, but she went back to him. Can judgment be left out of any analysis of that situation? As researchers and counsellors, our role is to understand; it is not to stand in judgment.

The following quotes represent some of Cindy's thoughts on why she did and other women do stay in emotionally abusive relationships:

**THIS WAS
JUST THE
WAY IT WAS**

I don't know how you relate the relationships with your parents or family or growing up because at that time you don't know - Growing up I believed that this was life, this was just the way it was - I didn't know there was anything wrong. The emotional abuse was there - getting into a relationship

The men I was with showed me more love than what I had as a child

is almost like my alcoholism -when I started drinking and for years after with my drinking - I didn't believe I was an alcoholic for the main reason that this is what everybody did. My family did it - my partners and their family did it - it was a small community - you drank, it was a normal thing.

That is my comfort zone

And I think that is why people stay in relationships, why I stayed because it doesn't matter what is done because as a child I didn't have that love and the men I was with showed me more love than what I had as a child, so I thought that this was love; this is why they come back because they love me and this is why they do things - its because of my weight, and my alcoholism and drug addiction and my coping skills and I wasn't a good housekeeper so you go with them and then you come back and give me a couple of days to clean the house and then you'll love me again.

No matter what goes on in life it is your fault

Every relationship I got in -- you know you say, "why do people stay in that?" it's because that is my comfort zone. that is where I knew I was comfortable I mean if someone gave me a compliment I wouldn't know how it take it. You seek it out - its a sickness - you seek out that kind of a person you look for the meanest person that you could be with- so you can feel good about you -because you know what is coming you know what's in line.

I wasn't being beaten so I didn't think that I was being abused

Yes and that is all emotional abuse like you know what you saw but by the end of it you don't, you really don't know what is reality any more. You don't know if this is the way it is supposed to be, if this is life because you were told all along that it is your fault; no matter what goes on in life it is your fault.

I'd beat myself up constantly

I didn't want to be alone. I didn't want to fail at another relationship, everyone told me that I wasn't being beaten so I didn't think that I was being abused, that didn't come until after I started losing the weight. This was so hard to understand, when I was big my first partner didn't want me and when I started losing the weight, my second husband didn't want me so I was totally upset with myself I didn't know if I should be big or small.

Emotionally wise I was drained I would rather just lay in my house in my bed and just die because I didn't know who I was anymore what I should be I believed anything anybody told me at this point. Back then there was no such thing as emotional abuse so I didn't think that this was a form of abusing myself, at the end of it, it was me abusing me because I had nobody

else there to do it, so I did it. I'd beat myself up constantly and it was because that was what I was used to so if I am in a house I have three children and they love me unconditionally and there is nobody there to abuse me I started doing it to me. I'd eat myself until I was up to a certain weight again and then I would crash diet until I am down and it was to a point that it becomes a part of you, emotional abuse becomes a part of you. it doesn't necessarily mean that someone has to be in your life to do it.

You grow up insecure with low self esteem

Why does she keep going back to him? He beats her once a week but as a child, a child's love for their parent is unconditional, I don't think it changes that much when they become adults. The child's love for the parent whether male or female is unconditional, so if mother or father kicks the child and then later on cuddles them and says I am sorry if that happens enough the child is going to think she hit me but she loves me. She only hits me because she loves me, so you grow up insecure with low self esteem because you don't understand all of this hitting and this abuse. You look for a relationship with something you know that seems comfortable, that it seems the way life should be, when you get into a relationship and he hits you and he is going to say that he's sorry because he is scared of the law, the courts and everything else he says he is sorry, it works out, two weeks later you are hit again, it's getting a little worse now so he must love me more, he's hitting me a little worse, he runs around on me, he beats me and I mean that's ok because he loves me, because that is your idea of what unconditional love is.

It's what's society has told her all along this is normal

For women who are in healthy relationships that's what's normal for women in unhealthy relationships that's what's normal to her. It's what society has told her all along is normal, so what if he calls you stupid so what if he puts you down, so what if he makes fun of your cooking, so what if he tells you that you can't clean the house, so what if he tells you that you can't look after the kids, so what, that's what you were taught being brought up, that's what you know. You are going to stay there because you believe it, you believe you can't clean the house so you get someone to help you, because you actually can't. Every time I would cook my nerves would be shot, I would think I have to go to cooking class. Now that I can cook, I don't know how to take a compliment well, I don't know if I ever did.

I would rather have been stabbed than have

You can't get a peace bond on emotional abuse, it's only words. People don't understand that words cut deeper than knives and that is exactly what its like. There were times when I would rather have been stabbed than have what was said because you get beaten down so bad. You become very inadequate in society, very unreliable and mostly become an alcoholic. I

what was
said

would say 95% of alcoholic women have been abused emotionally and didn't know how to deal with it and therefore they took the bottle. Physically abused women go to transition houses a lot of emotionally abused women like what they have and just don't like what is being said to them, or don't like what is being done to them, they don't understand that it is abuse, they turn to the bottle when they feel lonely. So what are we telling society, stay with him because he's not that bad but just drink yourself to sleep to help deal with it? You deal with it the best way you know how and any woman, man or child who picks up a drink knows that the pain is gone and of course they are going to like that and they are going to continue that.

They say,
"you're
lucky he's
not hitting
you"

Society doesn't think emotional abuse is anything, they say he was only carrying on when he said that, they say you're lucky he's not hitting you. The physical abuse always stands up the most, it is the first and foremost thing it is worse than anything else so that is what they are concentrating on. The emotional abuse is lessened by society. It is just choosing which weapon you are going to destroy this woman with.

Cindy's reasons for staying reflect issues discussed earlier regarding the side-effects of a patriarchal society that often places women in a powerless position. It is difficult to imagine that arguments still need to be made regarding the impact of physical abuse in intimate relationships. Women like Cindy understand all too well that the emotional impact will not gain too much sympathy and certainly not any action from a legal perspective.

From an interactionist perspective, having the freedom to act and react is critical to the lived experience. The question of freedom must be considered from a different perspective when dealing with an emotionally abused woman and an unhealthy relationship. For someone like Cindy, who has not had the lived experience of knowing that something different exists, she is limited in her freedom simply because she is not free to choose what she does not know exists. In this sense, Cindy represents the thorn bird

that goes endlessly searching for the thorn tree so that her fate will be sealed. She does so without reservation and with strong conviction that this is what she is to do. If she was at all hesitant, Cindy's mother's push out of the nest ended that notion and she was left to find her way through the thorns that were ahead. She never thought about leaving this "comfort zone" and knew that suffering was a part of life. She never complained about finding an abusive man when she had been told and shown all her life that she deserved nothing more. Survival was the key in Cindy's life and that did not leave room for choices. Cindy, like Jenny, never complained about the lot she was given and in her dictionary of life, there was no word or symbol that represented self-pity:

I never saw a wild thing
sorry for itself.
A small bird will drop frozen dead from a bough
without ever having felt sorry for itself.
("Self Pity," D.H. Lawrence cited in
The Complete Poems of D.H.
Lawrence, 1964, p.467)

CHAPTER FIVE: UNDERSTANDING THE WEARING

Freedom's Limitations

**“Yelling at living things does tend to kill the spirit in them. Sticks and stones may break our bones, but words will break our hearts”
(Robert Fulghum, cited in Evans, 1996, p.23).**

Killing the spirit seems to be an appropriate description for emotionally abused women. The interactions that have occurred in the lives of both Cindy and Jenny were such that it left them with little or no self-confidence. They both agreed that healing from the pain of a broken heart or wounded spirit was a long and hurtful process. Women who are emotionally abused, learn to deal with the “sticks” and “stones” but the words are critical and wound the heart.

Jenny described herself as a prisoner and Cindy cried her way up the aisle to marriage being told this would be her only chance. Symbolic interactionism holds at its base the premise that individuals are agents of change because we act and react. In order to act as an agent of change, however, one must have a certain amount of freedom. A further exploration of the concept of freedom must be considered specifically in relation to the emotionally abused woman.

The Funk and Wagnalls dictionary (1964) provides a number of definitions for the term freedom including:

Exemption or liberation from slavery or imprisonment; exemption from political restraint or autocratic control; liberty of choice or action; the state of the will as the first cause of human actions; self determination in rational beings; exemption or release from obligations, ties etc.; ease, facility; frankness or familiarity in speech or manner; the right to enjoy the privileges of membership or citizenship; unrestricted use; ease of motion. (p.503)

Charon (1979) outlines how symbolic interactionism conceptualizes the “free” person:

The “I” tells us that socialization is never complete, that part of us goes untouched by society, that we continuously surprise ourselves in what we do, that we are creative, impulsive, spontaneous. The “I” means that we do engage in action not thought out: this is exciting in the sense that action can be taken, thinking about it can occur afterward, and new ideas about the world can arise, new directions taken. I say “no” to my master without thinking, and afterward I realize the possibility of refusing to conform, and “no” becomes a thinking act. (p.174)

“No” becomes a thinking act in situations where fear does not exist or where one feels that independent thinking is a good thing. In emotionally abusive relationships, according to the stories told by the women in this study, thinking becomes distorted. Most reported that they were told that they were stupid and often doubted their own ability to think or problem solve. Due to the impact of the emotional abuse, women learn to doubt themselves and perspective eventually becomes warped as Cindy describes:

I came home one night and my partner had his new girlfriend in my house, in my bed and before the night was over he had me totally believing that I didn't see what I saw because I was stupid anyway, I blow things out of proportion and after a while you think maybe I didn't see it, maybe it didn't happen. That is all emotional abuse like you know what you saw but by the end of it you don't, you really don't know what is reality any more. You don't know if this is the way it is supposed to be, if this is life because you were told all along it is your fault; no matter what goes on it is your fault.

The spontaneous side that the “I” produces appears to be lost in relationships where the “I” is either made to feel useless or becomes merged so totally in a need to complete the other. The “I” component that is spontaneous in most of us is a lot like the child who is able to exert free will and stand up with even a little independence now and then. It appears that this has been robbed from the emotionally abused woman, and as a result much of the “I” is lost or does not develop to its full potential. Words such as “freedom,” saying “no” and “refusing to conform” take on an entirely different set of symbols and meanings to those living in the thorn trees.

The second concept of the free person relates to the “me” (Charon, 1979):

Mind activity is activity that analyzes situations and directs the self performing a certain way in a situation. This is an active ongoing process, causing action to go one way, then another, causing the individual to reanalyze situations, to recall past and construct future as action unfolds. Rather than habit or instinct taking us through social situations, it is definition and planning carried out with the self that is central. (p.174)

Analyzing situations and then acting accordingly is a critical piece of each person’s work. The emotionally abused woman is continuously analyzing the messages that she receives. Her analysis is based on what she has repeatedly seen and heard and correct responses are imperative to try to keep peace. The freedom to think for oneself is often taken away in these situations:

...when someone has power over you so you lose your own identity. You are not able to think for yourself or do what you want to do. You are just not yourself because you have to please this other person. They have complete control over everything you do and everything you say. (Jenny)

I had a relationship with a real nice guy for three months and I had to let him go because I didn't know how to deal with it because it was not my comfort zone . I couldn't identify it... like when I was being abused I would say, ok this person loves me because this is what my mom did I identified it from my past. If someone called me names and I would get home and someone would say you're stupid, well he is right because this is what I was taught. In all my relationships the meaner or nastier they were the more I thought they loved me. The more beatings I took, well this person really loves me because this is what I know. (Cindy)

The third concept of freedom Charon (1979) outlines relates to symbols which allow for the creation of new thoughts and acts:

Symbols are also a source of human freedom. With words as tools, the human is able to construct new ideas, new synthesis, new strategies. Give the human words and the ability to remember and combine them, there is no way to stop new creative thoughts and acts. (p.175)

Words and language, through symbols, do act as a source of freedom, but they can also serve as a dangerous weapon when being misused. Those who are attaching meanings and definitions to negative messages, often get feedback that can be damaging to the self. The self is vulnerable to getting defined through the words that it receives:

Every child loves to believe that your mom and dad loves them so you're being brought up in this house where you are constantly being told things, constantly being pushed aside, constantly being corrected, constantly being told negative things about yourself and, when I got into relationships or even met someone, if they didn't say something I wouldn't know how to deal with that. (Cindy)

The final concept relates to "becoming" and recognizes that we do not have a predetermined fate. We act as potential agents of change in our day to day lives:

Humans are constantly changing, constantly "becoming." We are dynamic, our interactions influence what we do and are. We are not damned (or blessed) with our past as a determining agent; we are not imprisoned by the ideas or traits we have developed long ago. It is always in the present that we actively define what is important. Interaction with others and with self constantly shifts our direction, our action, our definition of the world and self. (p. 175)

Healthy individuals who have experienced the opportunity to create or initiate change come to realize that they can be a determining agent in their own lives. Others have come to understand that their lives are not in their own hands because this power has been taken from them or was never given to them. A woman whose every move is being monitored cannot be seen as free in the same sense as others who enjoy this right:

I almost lost my personality. People who knew me then and see me now they say they cannot believe how much I have changed. I couldn't even talk about things back then because I was afraid I would say something about him or something about home and I'd get into trouble. So I think I went into myself further during the time I was married. (Jenny)

A sharp contrast exists between the reality of freedom as outlined by Charon (1979) and the world as it exists for the emotionally abused woman. One must recognize this contrast when considering perspective and response for these women. A bird got trapped in my father's garage the other day. Even though my father had opened all the doors and as many windows as he could, the bird stayed at the one window which did not open, frantically throwing itself against it. Freedom was so close at hand, but the exhausted bird finally dropped to floor, leaving its fate in the hands of whoever came along. Dad gently picked it up and hoped that she would regain her strength if placed in a

safe, shaded spot. A short while later he discovered that she had taken flight. The critical issue lies in whether or not enough strength can be kept so that when a window opens or a hand comes along, there is an opportunity for flight.

Shaping the "Self"

The issue of why a woman stays in a relationship that is considered abusive must consider the perspective of the woman as has come to understand herself. Mead refers to this in his discussion of "self" (Manis & Meltzer, 1978). He claims that the fact that a person can respond to his or her own gestures implies that we all have a self. "He may praise, blame, or encourage himself; he may become disgusted with himself, may seek to punish himself and so forth." The critical component of the development of self is that it is shaped through the definitions of others. "The standpoint of other provided a platform for getting outside oneself and thus viewing oneself." (p.18).

This definition of self comes from the role taken by individuals throughout their growth process. Much of the understanding of self becomes shaped through the definitions we assign activities and events. Obviously, exposure to a variety of experiences, both positive and negative, influence this development. The two women interviewed had contrasting childhood experiences in which one was extremely sheltered, while the other was exposed to an extremely unhealthy childhood. Regardless of whether one is raised in an abusive, alcoholic family or a close religious family, the process of shaping the self begins at childhood through internalizing definitions. "By learning the

symbols of his group, he comes to internalize their definitions of events or things, including their definitions of his own conduct” (p.18).

Both women clearly illustrate that their family experiences and “roles” as women, influenced decisions regarding choosing and staying with their partners. For Jenny, it was the fact that she did not want to hurt her parents by telling them of the pain she endured at the hands of her partner even before they were married. She claims that once married, she felt she needed to follow the model shown by her parents. She was also influenced by her religion which sent the message that marriage was for life. She also said that, as a woman, she felt it was her responsibility to just try to do what was necessary to please others. In the end, it was her role as mother that would help initiate the process of flight.

Cindy made it clear in her story that the definitions of self that she had developed as a child were critical in terms of decisions she made in relationships with her partners. She chose men who treated her the way she felt she deserved to be treated. The meaner they were to her, the closer they came to her comfort zone. She became a “chameleon” who could change automatically to try to be whatever someone else wanted her to be. The “platform for getting outside oneself” in order to get a closer look at herself could not have been made clearer.

**“All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts.
(Shakespeare, 1598, p.360)**

For emotionally abused women, the roles may change somewhat as they enter relationships, but they are always influenced by the meaning assigned to each. Many women talk of the confusion of having to play the role, as Jenny did, of caretaker to the very man who treated her so badly. Many talk of having to be emotionally supportive to their husbands while never knowing what the right thing might be on any given day. As a child, Cindy worked hard to fill the role that her mother expected and in the end, she says she grew up to be what mom always said she would, “ugly and stupid.” When her partners called her this, she felt like she was “back home again.”

For Cindy, as was the case with Jenny, fear of injury to her child led to a movement in terms of changing the situation. Cindy left her first partner when he dislocated the shoulder of their thirteen month old daughter. This forced the “disturbance in equilibrium” Mead (cited in Manis & Meltzer, 1978) refers to and influenced Cindy’s decision to go to the shelter for battered women. After getting to the shelter, Cindy came to learn new symbols and came to the sad realization that her definition of love was actually abuse. She claims she did not want to believe this to be true because admitting it would mean admitting that it had started at childhood.

Testing Her Wings

Through the sharing of the two women interviewed for this project, we come to understand lived experience from a different perspective. Neither of the two women made the decision to leave based on things related to how she was treated. Both

acknowledged that after they left the relationship, they realized how much better off they were, but this was not the catalyst for movement.

One has to wonder why some women do not feel that they deserve a better life for themselves. Both Jenny and Cindy left because of the children, so too did Jane Hurshman-Stafford. This brings us back to the issue of how women are viewed in our society. They have often been given the message that a very small price tag has been placed on their value. Centuries of history placing women on the bottom of society's totem pole, to use Cindy's analogy, have left their mark. Whether viewing the larger scale patriarchy or that which exists within the structure of the home, women are not coming in contact with symbols, definitions or roles that reflect the notion that they are important, they are worthy and they are deserving of more than what they presently receive.

The actions and interactions that are necessary to bring this change is another whole thesis. For the purpose of those who are emotionally abused, it is critical that we not lose sight of the fact that these women, while wounded in spirit, are strong in courage. To do what these women do every day is a testament to this truth. Like the bird in my father's garage and every thorn bird searching for a tree, they will surprise you with their tenacity. When it looks like they are down and out, they may just be gaining strength for the flight. Estés (1992) reminds us of women's instinctive psyche personified in the Wild Woman archetype:

Wild Woman is the health of all women. Without her, women's psychology makes no sense. This wilderwoman is the prototypical woman...no matter what culture, no what era, no matter what politic, she does not change. Her cycles change, her symbolic representations change, but in essence, she does not change. She is what *she* is and she is whole. (p.8)

Just as the "wild woman" possesses a natural instinct to protect her young, she somehow manages to keep a reserve which is held, perhaps, in the hollow where self respect and confidence has been gutted. Perhaps this intuitive instinct that women possess to survive is what has allowed us to continue through the generations of power imbalance. The women in this study and the many others who are living out the reality of abuse cannot be forced into society's definitions or roles, nor can they be told when to move. They must wait for a time when their definitions and symbols, their perspective and their roles, are aligned in the right position to provide her with the power necessary to take a critical step. Estés believes that each and every woman has it within her to make a move for survival when the time is right:

Fortunately no matter how many times she is pushed down, she bounds up again. No matter how many times she is forbidden, quelled, cut back, diluted, tortured, touted as unsafe, dangerous, mad and other derogations, she emanates upward in women, so that even the most quiet, even the most restrained woman keeps a secret place for her. Even the most repressed woman has a secret life, with secret thoughts and secret feelings which are lush and wild, that is, natural. Even the most captured woman guards the place of the wildish self, for she know intuitively that someday there will be a loophole, an aperture, a chance, and she will hightail it to escape. (p.8)

In the years that I have spent working with women who have suffered from abuse, I have continued to be amazed at the strength of these women. Perhaps their ability to

adapt to roles and shape themselves to life experiences out of necessity is what helps them to survive. The strength that they find must somehow be shaped by living in thorn trees. For the thorn bird, existence is the price paid for its superlative song. For the emotionally abused woman, it seems that she has found a way to live in the thorn trees and still survive. Through the stories of these two survivors, it is possible to present hope. These thorn birds have proven they can rise above their own agony: they do not pierce their breast to die, they pierce it to live... and so the thorn bird's legend must change. While the song is superlative, no woman should have to pay this price for existence. It is only when society learns to value women's existence and promote their freedom that we can say "...the whole world stills to listen and God in His heaven smiles." (McCullough, 1977, The Thorn Birds, Forward)

CHAPTER SIX: IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Taking Flight

The purpose of this study was to validate the effects of emotional abuse by having women define this phenomenon through their own experiences and to apply this understanding to the critical question of why women stay in abusive relationships. After conducting this research, I realize that the reasons for staying vary with every woman but that some consistencies seem to exist. In a general sense, women seem to stay because they often do not see other options available to them. Women often feel responsible for keeping the family together or providing a home for the children. Women are often fearful of the consequences of leaving or do not feel that they are capable taking the steps needed to make a serious change in their life. Some women do not feel they deserve something better or do not know that other options exist. This was the case with Cindy who had been taught throughout her life that abuse was normal. Jenny knew that the way she was being treated was wrong, but she felt pressured because of her personal religious belief that marriage was meant to last a lifetime. The years of ongoing erosion of self-esteem seem to cause women to feel paralyzed in terms of making decisions or changes. Many women do not know or forget that the option of choice is available to them since they often lose the power of making decisions or choices within the relationship. The powerlessness that is created seems to reach every woman in an emotionally abusive relationship. Strong women eventually lose the confidence they once had, while those with low esteem

continue to have this reinforced. The battle to see light at the end of this dark tunnel grows deeper with each act that takes its emotional toll and appears to make it harder for the woman to see leaving as an option.

The complexity of this issue and its deep-rooted impact make it difficult to summarize a definition. It is not surprising that the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence states, "There is no universally accepted definition of emotional abuse" (1996, p.1). It confirms that only a few studies provide insight on emotional abuse because of the difficult nature of conducting research due to the following facts:

- in comparison to other forms of abuse, its effects have only recently been recognized
- there are no consistent definitions and it is hard to define;
- it is difficult to detect, assess and substantiate; and
- many cases of emotional abuse go unreported (p.3)

Based on the stories told by Jenny and Cindy, these facts are understandable. Women would be unlikely to report this form of abuse when it is currently considered to have no definition and is generally unable to be substantiated. The truth, however, is that women, like those in this study, can clearly identify definitions of emotional abuse based on what they have experienced. The issue appears to be that of determining how to give voice to these women so that definitions and substantiations can be forthcoming. Validation requires acknowledging the impact emotional abuse has on women's lives.

Although attempts to define emotional abuse have been limited, Walker (1984), summarized clinical reports and determined that emotional abuse primarily undermines a

woman's self-esteem or sense of control or safety. Kasian and Painter (1992) identify behaviors considered as leading to emotional abuse:

...threats of physical harm to the woman, her children or family; behaviors that denigrated her character, her ability to function in job-related, parenting, or other roles; and behaviors that suggested that her needs, wishes, or feelings were unworthy of consideration. (p.350)

The stories told by Cindy and Jenny confirm that emotional abuse does manifest itself in the behaviors listed above, as well as in other ways. Both women repeatedly referred to the loss of control in their lives and the loss of identity which came as a result. Both told of the pain that came from losing self-esteem and coming to feel as though they were "unworthy" human beings. In the sections of this report titled "Defining Emotional Abuse/Impact," Jenny and Cindy clearly identify definitions of emotional abuse through examples, metaphors and symbols. Defining the term does not appear to be an issue for those who have experienced emotional abuse. The difficulty seems to be in how society as a whole can come to validate this phenomenon and intervene effectively.

In an article reviewing a Canadian survey on violence against women, Johnson and Rodgers (1994) point out that traditional research studies have not been designed to measure sensitive kinds of victimizations to which women are vulnerable:

Traditional victimization surveys have not included the sensitive question wording that is necessary to elicit the trust and willingness of the respondent to disclose personal experiences, nor have they taken steps to ensure the safety of the women responding. Furthermore, they have not recognized the serious trauma that victims of intimate violence experience following the event and may experience during disclosure to an interviewer. (p.3)

Preliminary statistics from indicators in a Statistics Canada report (cited in Rodgers & Statistics Canada, 1994) reveal that 35 percent of all women surveyed reported that their spouse was emotionally abusive and 18 percent reported experiencing emotional abuse, but not physical abuse, in the relationship. The statistics are alarming, and what is equally alarming is the limited steps being taken to deal with this issue. The stories told by Cindy and Jenny send a strong message that the time has come to ensure that we can create clear definitions and find a means of detecting the many cases that are presently unreported.

An exploration of freedom as a component of symbolic interactionism illustrated that this concept is critical to the individual's ability to act as an agent of change. The symbols and definitions that develop through the day to day life of emotionally abused women shape perspective for them and virtually remove the option of freedom. The historical review of the treatment of women through a patriarchal society reflects the reality that women's freedom has been restricted. This is contrary to "Article 1" of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 1995, p.9). The two women in this study indicated clearly in their stories that they lost control over their own lives. They, as well as the many others whose freedom has been limited due to a power differential, are being robbed of their of basic rights:

Every individual should have equal opportunity with other individuals to make for himself or herself the life that he or she is able and wishes to have, consistent with his or her duties and obligations as a member of society, without being hindered in or prevented from doing so by discriminatory practices based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, marital status, family status, disability or conviction for an offense for which a pardon has been granted. (Canadian Human Rights Commission, p.9)

This study consisted of only two stories. One participant said she had very low self-esteem and came from an abusive home. The other participant had a very strong and supportive family. Yet both became victims of emotional abuse. One can no longer conclude that emotional abuse only happens to women with low self-esteem or particular backgrounds. Potentially every woman could be at risk of emotional abuse. There is no profile for those who will be at risk of abuse as Mulligan (1991) points out: "It is repeatedly pointed out in the literature that the battered woman does not fit one psychological or socioeconomic mold. In fact, the few common characteristics that do appear are the direct result of the abuse" (p.3.15). It is known that there are many more stories of women like Jenny and Cindy. The stories of Jenny and Cindy alone validate this issue and warrant action on developing a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon, its consequences and appropriate strategies for intervention. The story of two serves to warn us that this is the story of many. It is not statistics that are needed, it is action.

Implications for Counselling

...empowerment is about women's ability to analyze their own situations, describe for themselves, and take action to improve their lives. It is about addressing the reasons for women's marginalization in many aspects of life. Empowerment...means self-confidence, and the feeling that change is possible. (MATCH cited in Working Group on Violence Against Women, 1996, Introduction)

Counsellors, like all professionals, must take every opportunity not to condone patriarchal practices and work toward the empowerment of women. This philosophy should be represented through a variety of channels, but particularly within the counsellor's own practice. Evans (1996) claims, "Therapeutic methods have developed over the past hundred years in the context of the patriarchal and hierarchical assumptions of Western culture" (p.180). It is critical that every counsellor consider the implications of these assumptions within their own practice and approaches.

The women in this study made it clear that they were silenced in their relationships as a part of the control the abuser enforced. Abusive situations often make it dangerous or virtually impossible for women to speak about what is happening to them. Both Jenny and Cindy were willing to speak openly when they were provided with an environment that was safe and felt to be non-judgmental. Jenny spoke to the social worker at the hospital and Cindy talked to workers at a shelter for battered women. Counsellors must be able to provide such an environment for their clients.

Counsellors should be well informed of the various forms of abuse that exist and recognize that women may be reluctant to disclose or unable to label "emotional abuse." Women may report to a counselling session for a variety of reasons such as depression, marital problems or suicidal ideation and may never speak of emotional abuse. The

counsellor must to be aware of warning signs to be able to identify possible victims who hold the secrets of emotional abuse. It is critical that women are provided with their opportunity to tell their stories so that the process of empowerment can begin. The counsellor is in a position to be one person who can provide the emotionally abused woman with an opportunity for voice:

I believe that you are the expert on your own experience. I don't believe in privileged knowledge-experts who can tell you how you should be or what is true for you. I do believe a therapist or counsellor can assist you if she or he can support you in bringing forth new awareness and new strength. (Evans, 1996, p.179)

In keeping with feminist-based therapy practices, counsellors should integrate a proactive stance in eradicating oppression in the lives of their clients and work toward empowerment. Empowerment for the emotionally abused woman will often not exist in any other context and the counsellor is in a unique position to offer this alternative through her/his practice. The Feminist Therapy Institute illustrates the role of the feminist therapist:

Feminist therapists are accountable for the management of power differential within the therapist/client relationship. Because of the limitations of a purely intrapsychic model of human functioning, feminist therapists facilitate the understanding of interactive effects of the client's internal and external worlds. Feminist therapists possess knowledge about the psychology of women and utilize feminist scholarship to revise theories and practices, incorporating new knowledge as it is generated. (1987, Preamble)

Evans (1996) discusses the use of narrative approaches in terms of being effective for dealing with clients who suffer from any of the various forms of abuse. She describes it as being nonhierarchical. The use of narrative therapy also takes into account the nature of living systems. "It is based on constructivist theory, a theory that takes the view that our identity or self-description is, in part at least, developed through the "stories" we hear about ourselves" (p.180).

Jenny and Cindy reported that they had not told other people about the emotional abuse for a number of reasons. Cindy did not know that she was suffering from abuse. Her childhood interactions and her development of definitions led her to believe that the way she was being treated was normal. It was only after she went to a shelter for abused women (because her child had been injured by her partner) that she came to realize that she was a victim of emotional abuse and had been for years. Jenny reported that going to Halifax because of her son's illness lead her to talk to a social worker at the hospital. She said that her son facilitated the process by being the first person to talk to hospital workers about the abuse that had been occurring at home. Jenny said once she started talking about it, she came to realize just how bad things were at home. She said that the counsellor did not tell her what to do in any way but allowed her to come to the realization that she had to do something to change her situation.

A friend paid me a big compliment yesterday. After meeting with her because she was having some personal difficulties, she said, "I like talking with you because you don't tell me what to do." Perhaps the reason is because I have no idea what she should do. She does not know either, but the mere act of talking about the situation allows her to say

the words that will help her make the decisions she needs to make. It is critical to women who are in abusive relationships that their stories are told and the listener is supportive but non-judgmental.

Women who are making important decisions about changing their lives need to be supported and encouraged. It is critical, however, they not be rushed. The stories told by the women in this report confirm the fact that time is critical in the process. A woman needs to feel ready to make a critical move and the role of the counsellor is to support this process even if she returns to the abusive situation. The counsellor should always discuss the issue of the woman's safety and ensure that a concrete action plan is in place for an emergency situation.

The framework of symbolic interactionism is complimentary to the philosophy of narrative therapy. The use of a symbolic interactionist framework for this project was designed to provide understanding of the phenomenon of emotional abuse by having women tell their stories. When women are given the opportunity to have voice and to know that someone truly wants to listen, much is learned. The learning comes not only to the listener but also to the storyteller. The validation that a woman receives when she feels that she is truly being heard and she has the right to speak, is a critical first step in empowerment. The placement of a non-judgmental and caring person into the life of one who has been told she is worthless, may facilitate the "disturbance of equilibrium" (Mead, in Manis and Meltzer, 1978) and open the door to new options and perspective. This

process should be available through many channels, not just counsellors, so that the window of opportunity can keep being opened for the day the thorn bird chooses to fly.

Our patriarchal society continuously sets traps that cause a woman to have her wings clipped, frequently making flight impossible. For the thorn bird, the obstacles often seem insurmountable. The same process, however, that has served to shape perspectives and definitions seems to compensate by developing strength, endurance, and determination in these women. Cindy and Jenny learned to out-sing the lark or the nightingale. They were pierced by the thorn and did not die. They possess the instinctive nature for survival (Estés, 1992). They lived amidst the thorns and dangerous obstacles and waited and waited and waited. The role of the counsellor and as members of society is to make every opportunity available to the thorn bird. We must be prepared so that on any given day when a small bird flies free of the thorns and drops somewhere in our fields, our city streets, or our front door, we don't say it is best to leave it alone. We must not turn our back on it because it is injured. We must be willing to say, "Congratulations on making it this far. Please allow us to support you the rest of the way. Take the time you need to rest, become strong and become empowered. Tell me of the other thorn birds you know who have not been able to fly. Tell me of your journey so that I can understand and learn from it." As a society, we must commit to always keeping a window wide open in our hospitals, our churches, our police stations, our counselling and women's centres, our schools, our shelters and our homes so that any woman or thorn bird who happens to land, however briefly, will feel welcome and safe. In terms of emotional abuse, we do not have

the answers, but we have the knowledge to ask just one critical question: Will you tell me your story?

With A Broken Wing

She loved him like he was the last man on earth,
Gave him everything she ever had.
He'd break her spirit down then come lovin' up on her,
Give a little, then take it back.
She'd tell him about her dreams.
He'd just shoot them down.
Lord he loved to make her cry.
"You're crazy for believin' you'll ever leave the ground."
He said, "Only angels know how to fly."
And with a broken wing she still sings.
She keeps an eye on the sky.
With a broken wing she carries her dreams.
Man you ought to see her fly.

One Sunday morning, she didn't go to church
He wondered why she didn't leave.
He went up to the bedroom, found a note by the window,
With the curtains blowin' in the breeze.
And with a broken wing she still sings
She keeps an eye on the sky.
With a broken wing she carries her dreams,
Man you ought to see her fly.

With a broken wing she carries her dreams
Man you ought to see her fly.
(House, J., Hogin, S., & Barnhart, P., 1997, track 4)

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APPENDIX 1: CONSENT FORM

For the purpose of conducting research for the project “Wounds Women Wear,” by Kelly McNenly, the following conditions are mutually agreed upon by the researcher and participant:

As Researcher I agree to the following:

- **Conduct the interviews in a place mutually agreeable to the participant and myself.
This location will reflect a comfortable and safe environment.**
- **To ensure that the strictest of confidentiality procedures be upheld at all times including and following the production of the final product.**
- **Ensure that every participant is supplied with an opportunity to have support/counselling available throughout the course of this research.**
- **Provide an opportunity for each participant to read direct quotes which appear in the document and have the opportunity to indicate if anything is quoted out of context or inadvertently provides identifying characteristics of the participant.**

As Participant, I consent to the following:

- The interviews being audio-recorded with the understanding that the tapes will be destroyed upon successful completion of the final document and will be listened to only by me or one person hired for transcribing.
- That the information given by me be used for the purpose of the above named thesis and any subsequent journals.
- That a verbatim transcript of the interview be created with each participant's name being replaced by a pseudonym.

I have read and understand the conditions outlined above and agree to proceed with this research project in accordance to these conditions.

Participant Signature

Researcher Signature

Date

Date