

# Turning Points: Critical Incidents Prompting Survivors to Begin the Process of Terminating Abusive Relationships

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## Abstract

The decision whether to leave an abusive relationship is very complex for victims. A small but growing body of research demonstrates the importance of turning points in these decisions. Situated within the theoretical framework of the Trans-theoretical Model of Change, this study uses a phenomenological data analysis process to analyze the descriptions of turning points provided by a sample of 123 survivors of past abusive relationships who had been out of any abusive relationships for at least 2 years. Six distinct themes of turning points are identified: (a) facing the threat of severe violence; (b) changing their perspective about the relationship, abuse, and/or their partner; (c) learning about the dynamics of abuse; (d) experiencing an intervention from external sources or consequences; (e) realizing the impact of the violence on children; and (f) the relationship being terminated by the abuser or some other cause. Implications for research, counseling practice, and theory are discussed.

## Keywords

intimate partner violence, domestic violence, turning points, transtheoretical model of change

Abusive relationships typically involve long-term patterns of violent, abusive behaviors that serve the purpose of controlling victims and maintaining perpetrators' control. Although some people leave a potentially abusive relationship at the first sign of abuse, many victims remain in abusive relationships for extended periods of time. There are many reasons that victims may remain in abusive relationships, including financial dependence, believing that staying is the best arrangement for their children, fear of retaliation, and feelings of love for their partners. For many counselors, other professionals, and informal sources of social support, it is difficult to understand victims' reasons for remaining in abusive relationships, especially when the risk of harm is high. In fact, research suggests that professionals not only do not understand victims' reasoning but also stigmatize victims during the process of attempting to leave (Crowe & Murray, in press). Existing research confirms the complexity of victims' decisions whether to leave an abusive relationship, which are complicated by many factors. Indeed, the change process is often nonlinear, in that victims may decide to leave and then return many times before ultimately leaving once and for all.

A small body of previous research has identified the critical role of turning points in victims' decisions to leave abusive relationships. A turning point is defined as "a transitional event that redirects paths in the life course, such as forming a committed relationship (e.g., marriage) or becoming a parent. In other words, turning points move an individual from one stage of relative stability to another" (Khaw & Hardesty, 2007,

p. 415). Turning points are important for counselors to understand, because they offer insights into the circumstances, attitudes, and beliefs of survivors that ultimately may trigger them to take action toward ending an abusive relationship or seeking help to promote their safety. To build on the small but important body of literature on turning points, we conducted a phenomenological study using qualitative data drawn from a survey of 123 survivors of past abusive relationships who had been out of any abusive relationships for at least 2 years in order to learn about the turning points they experienced that ultimately led them to begin the process of ending their past abusive relationships. As a context for this study, the next section reviews literature on the process of deciding to leave an abusive relationship, as well as the limited existing research that specifically identifies the critical role of turning points in this process.

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## Literature Review

The process of leaving an abusive relationship is extremely complex. In this literature review, we first review research examining factors that impact the decision-making processes involved in leaving abusive relationships. Second, we discuss research using the Transtheoretical Model of Change (TTM; Prochaska & Velicer, 1997) as a framework for describing these decisions. Finally, we discuss existing research that looks specifically at the role of turning points in victims' decisions. In this article, we use the term *victim* to describe people currently involved in abusive relationships, and the term *survivor* describes people who experienced abuse in the past but are no longer involved in any abusive relationships (Murray & Graves, 2012).

### Factors Involved in Deciding Whether to Leave an Abusive Relationship

Leaving an abusive relationship can best be understood as a complex process and not a one-time event (Khaw & Hardesty, 2007; Patzel, 2001). A need remains for more research on understanding this process (Baly, 2010), but existing research suggests that the decision to leave is typically made over time and based on numerous factors. Prior to leaving, many victims go through an extended process of reevaluating the relationship and making efforts to disengage before they actually leave (Baly, 2010). Merritt-Gray and Wuest (1995) developed the reclaiming self model to describe the process through which women leave abusive relationships, and the model is based on qualitative research with 13 survivors of abusive relationships in rural Canada. Two processes involved in the immediate leaving process were called *counteracting abuse* and *breaking free*. The women counteracted abuse following the perpetrators' abusive actions, and they did so by giving up parts of themselves, minimizing the severity of the abuse, and strengthening their defenses and resources against the abuse. Upon breaking free, the women disengaged from their relationships and decided not to return to them.

Others researchers suggest that the steps that may be taken during the process of leaving include seeking information about abuse, telling friends or family members, empowering themselves (e.g., by regaining employment), and seeking professional help (Chang et al., 2006). Furthermore, victims may make multiple attempts to leave before making a final break (Griffing et al., 2002). As such, the process of leaving may occur multiple times before fully escaping the relationship. Even victims who choose to stay in their relationships have multiple options for how they may act within the context of that relationship, such as encouraging their partners to change, seeking help to cope with the abuse, and making efforts to prevent or reduce the severity of the violence. Of course, any decision victims may make about how they will respond to abusive relationships are impacted by the severity of their partners' control over them. When abusive partners are extremely controlling, victims' ability to make any changes—either within

or to leave the relationship—are often limited. Previous research demonstrates the extensive list of factors that impact victims' decisions whether to leave, and these fall into the following categories: dynamics of the abuse and perpetrator characteristics, personal resources of the victim, social influences, and child-related influences.

**Dynamics of the abuse and perpetrator characteristics.** The dynamics and severity of the abuse can impact victims' decisions whether to leave (Panchanadeswaran & McCloskey, 2007). Although in some cases more severe violence can lead to a greater perception of the need to change their circumstances (Reisenhofer & Taft, 2013), victims may choose to remain in their relationships if they are afraid of the consequences of leaving or have been threatened that they will be harmed or even killed if they leave (Griffing et al., 2002; Panchanadeswaran & McCloskey, 2007). However, extremely severe dynamics of abuse may lead to situational factors that prompt victims to leave, even if it means risking harm. For example, Smith (2003) described victims who left when the severity reached levels to which they realized they could not take the abuse any more or they believed that their or their children's lives were at stake. The nature of victims' relationships to their abusers also can impact these decisions, especially if victims feel a high level of attachment to their abusers or if they are involved in longer relationships with higher levels of commitment (Griffing et al., 2002; Reisenhofer & Taft, 2013).

**Personal resources of the victim.** The availability of personal resources can impact victims' decisions whether to end abusive relationships. Financial resources are especially relevant (Griffing et al., 2002; Panchanadeswaran & McCloskey, 2007), with greater access to economic resources making it more likely for victims to leave (Reisenhofer & Taft, 2013). Other researchers have examined victims' psychological resources that increase their likelihood of leaving, including self-efficacy (Reisenhofer & Taft, 2013) and self-reliance (Baly, 2010). In contrast, the psychological traits and attitudes that increase the likelihood that victims will remain in abusive relationships include depression (Reisenhofer & Taft, 2013), perceptions of fewer alternatives to their current relationship and higher levels of distress (Edwards, Gidycz, & Murphy, 2011), and feelings of guilt and shame (Baly, 2010).

**Social influences.** The social context, such as religious beliefs and cultural norms, surrounding victims also impacts their decisions whether to end an abusive relationship (Panchanadeswaran & McCloskey, 2007; Reisenhofer & Taft, 2013), especially as they are reflected in victims' subjective norms, or beliefs about what others think is true about their relationships, such as how important it is to stay in it (Shorey, Tirone, Nathanson, Handsel, & Rhatigan, 2013). In addition, the availability of both formal and informal social support impacts victims' decisions (Panchanadeswaran & McCloskey, 2007), with more available support making it more likely that they will leave (Reisenhofer & Taft, 2013). This includes whether

community resources are available and perceived as useful (Panchanadeswaran & McCloskey, 2007). However, previous negative help-seeking experiences may make it less likely that they will leave (Reisenhofer & Taft, 2013).

**Child-related influences.** Decisions whether to leave an abusive relationship are especially complicated when children are involved (Moe, 2009; Panchanadeswaran & McCloskey, 2007; Smith, 2003). The influence of children on these decisions can vary depending on how the victim views the abuse as impacting the children. If victims believe the abuse is not directly affecting their children, they may be more likely to tolerate the abuse, especially if they believe it is important to keep the relationship intact for the sake of the children (Moe, 2009; Reisenhofer & Taft, 2013). However, if victims believe that the children are or will be harmed by the abuse, or if they think they will lose their children if they report the intimate partner violence (IPV), then they may be more likely to leave (Moe, 2009; Reisenhofer & Taft, 2013).

Altogether, the experiences and decisions of victims in abusive relationships are very complex and influenced by a range of contextual and situational factors (Baly, 2010). For each individual victim, there is likely a unique constellation of influences that may make it more or less likely they will begin to take steps to end the relationship. To help further understand the process of ending an abusive relationship, researchers have applied the TTM to these decisions, and this research is discussed in the next section.

### *Transtheoretical Stages of Change Model and Deciding to Leave an Abusive Relationship*

Researchers have examined the applicability of Prochaska and DiClemente's (Prochaska & Velicer, 1997) TTM to understanding the decisions made by victims of IPV (Alexander, Tracy, Radek, & Koverola, 2009; Khaw & Hardesty, 2007; Shorey et al., 2013). Although this model has relevance for this population, several studies also demonstrate the importance of applying it with caution, given the variability in the ways that they move through stages (Khaw & Hardesty, 2007). We begin this section with a chronological review of some key studies that have examined the applicability of the TTM to the process of ending an abusive relationship.

In 2006, Chang et al. applied the TTM to women experiencing IPV, and they aimed to use a change mapping approach to apply the stages of change to the participants' experiences with abuse. Of the 20 participants they interviewed (9 of whom were currently in abusive relationships, and 11 of whom had past experiences of IPV), most maps depicted "nonlinear, nonsequential movement with many action behaviors resulting from an external trigger rather than any considered motivation or predetermined plan" (p. 333). In a similar study, Cluss et al. (2006) conducted a grounded theory study with 20 survivors of abusive relationships to examine the applicability of the TTM. After the first set of seven interviews was complete, the researchers identified the need to revise the coding system, as

the TTM was not a neat fit for the lived experiences of participants. To better reflect these experiences, Cluss and colleagues proposed a new model, the psychosocial readiness model, to describe how survivors balance internal and external factors that contribute to their decisions to move toward safety. Key internal factors include self-efficacy, perceived support, and awareness. External factors included interpersonal interactions and situational events surrounding the abuse. These researchers concluded that it is useful to view victims' change processes as a balance between their assessment of their internal resources and the external factors that impact their decisions and safety.

In 2009, Alexander, Tracy, Radek, and Koverola examined the TTM with a sample of 754 female adults who were seeking help related to IPV in two metropolitan areas in the Eastern United States. Some factors that were associated with being in an advanced level of change included greater economic resources, having more recent, severe experiences of physical violence, and feeling more positive about their level of social support. More recently, Catallo, Jack, Ciliska, and MacMillan, (2012) used the TTM as a framework for mapping the decisions about disclosing IPV in emergency rooms among a sample of 19 survivors of abuse. This study revealed that most participants' change processes over time were not linear, and some stages of the model were skipped altogether by some participants.

To consolidate existing research, Reisenhofer and Taft (2013) reviewed research between 1990 and 2013 to examine the application of the TTM to women experiencing IPV. Their review affirmed that the application of this model is complicated because women in abusive relationships face many safety risks that can impact their decisions about whether to leave their relationships. Across the studies they reviewed, Reisenhofer and Taft found support for the application of the TTM, although "women routinely 'leapfrogged' stages or 'regressed' through the stages of change pathway when working to achieve safety... Women also demonstrated behaviors that could be allocated to more than one stage of change and preparation was sometimes seen as being combined with or overlapping the action stage" (p. 538).

**Limitations of the application of the TTM to victims' decisions whether to leave abusive relationships.** It is clear from the existing research that the TTM offers insights into the process of leaving an abusive relationship, and yet researchers have identified several cautions to applying the TTM to this process. First, a limitation of the TTM to victims of battering is that their own stage of change is independent of their abuser's stage, and therefore their options for actually making the changes they would like to make are limited (Alexander et al., 2009; Catallo, Jack, Ciliska, & MacMillan, 2012; Cluss et al., 2006). Second, the lived experiences of victims in abusive relationships are typically active, yet nonlinear (Reisenhofer & Taft, 2013). The process of leaving abusive relationships is not linear, and victims may return to the relationship many times before ending it for good (Alexander et al., 2009; Chang et al., 2006). As survivors move toward leaving, they may seek help, experience a

renewed sense of self, work on building their resources, and make attempts to leave (Baly, 2010), some of which may not actually result in leaving.

A third limitation of the applicability of the TTM to the process of leaving an abusive relationship is the difficulty of defining what the optimal outcome might be (Reisenhofer & Taft, 2013). Unlike other health behavior issues to which the TTM has been applied, IPV is unique in that there is less clarity about a singular positive outcome or health behavior that signifies success, such as the goal of quitting smoking (Cluss et al., 2006). In the case of IPV, “multiple avenues of action may lead to successful resolution from the victim’s point of view, as long as the action results in decreased exposure to the partner’s violent or abusive behavior” (Cluss et al., 2006, p. 263). In particular, although leaving the relationship could be considered the clear successful outcome, leaving may encumber greater risks for the victim’s health and safety than remaining in the relationship. Fourth, another limitation of the application of the TTM to IPV is the potentially overlapping stages and behaviors within them (Reisenhofer & Taft, 2013). The same behaviors (e.g., getting a job) could be labeled by different survivors as representing different stages (e.g., preparation or action; Chang et al., 2006). Because of this complexity, researchers have noted the difficulty of determining what interventions to use at each stage (Reisenhofer & Taft, 2013). Experiences of IPV are extremely diverse, so it is important in both research and practice to avoid overly prescriptive approaches (Alexander et al., 2009). In particular, looking at movement between stages may be much more useful than attempting to identify a specific stage a survivor is experiencing (Chang et al., 2006; Cluss et al., 2006). Therefore, it is useful to examine the processes and dynamics that can prompt movement between stages. To this end, researchers have begun to identify the potential turning points that may lead to movement in the process of ending an abusive relationship.

### ***The Role of Turning Points in Decisions to Leave Abusive Relationships***

Turning points involve “an identifiable event or realization that influences positive movement along the stages of change continuum” (Reisenhofer & Taft, 2013, p. 543). Turning points result in permanent changes in victims’ perceptions of their experiences with abuse and their relationships, and multiple turning points may occur through the process of leaving an abusive relationship (Reisenhofer & Taft, 2013). As Baly (2010) said, “The process of dealing with abuse is not straightforward but instead may be lengthy, difficult, and dynamic in nature” (p. 2300). As such, turning points may not immediately result in the relationship ending, given the complexities involved in leaving. However, turning points can instigate change within that process (Khaw & Hardesty, 2007). In this section, we review four previous studies that addressed this issue before describing the current study, which further explored the role of turning points in survivors’ decisions to begin the process of leaving abusive relationships.

In 2001, Patzel defined turning points related to IPV as “an event that occurred after the initial occurrence of abuse in the relationship; the event was seen by the women as moving them toward leaving. Whatever the pattern of abuse in the relationship, there came a time when the women began to look at the relationship and the abuse differently. It was often likely that the women would experience several turning points as they repeatedly moved closer to being able to terminate the relationship” (p. 735). In a qualitative study with 10 women from a local domestic violence agency, Patzel (2001) identified several types of turning points, including severe or escalating violence, concern for their children, the abuser crossing a relationship boundary (e.g., infidelity), and other events, such as suicidal thoughts. Some cognitive shifts that also were related to turning points included realizing the extent of the abuse, thinking differently about their situations, beginning to see themselves as having agency and resourcefulness, and viewing themselves as self-efficacious. Thus, turning points may be internal or related to external events.

In order to identify the turning points that led women in abusive relationships to move from one stage to the next toward leaving, Khaw and Hardesty (2007) conducted a qualitative study with 19 mothers who had left abusive husbands. The researchers were interested in identifying specific turning points that were common at different stages of the TTM. They identified three consistent types of turning points, as well as one more inconsistent turning point. The first turning point, *realization*, typically moved women from precontemplation to contemplation. Here, women realized the nature and severity of the abuse they were experiencing. For some, the realization happened suddenly, and for others it happened gradually over time. The second turning point, which moved participants from contemplation to preparation, was labeled *pushed to react*. Here, the mothers noted the pileup of abuse and often increasing severity of the violence they faced. The third turning point was more variable, occurring between preparation and action. For some women, the turning point here moved them to the action stage. However, some of the others moved back to contemplation before going to action, while still others moved directly from contemplation to action, skipping preparation altogether. The fourth turning point occurred between action and maintenance and was labeled *the final exit*. This occurred as the women made the final decision to leave and not go back. As all of the participants were mothers, the identified turning points may not apply to survivors without children. Khaw and Hardesty’s findings provide two important insights regarding turning points related to IPV. First, they highlight the possibility that victims will experience multiple turning points, not just a single isolated incident. Second, these findings underscore the importance of understanding turning points within the context of the nature of the abuse. Despite the importance of these findings, the focus on three to four generalized turning points that are thought to occur predictably at different stages of change likely oversimplifies the role of turning points in the decisions that victims make, especially in light of the research reviewed above that highlights the diversity of experiences among survivors of abuse.

Although Baly's (2010) qualitative research study did not use the term *turning point*, the experience of one of the participants in this study illustrates the critical role of such incidents. Baly wrote of a survivor that "it took a particularly severe incident for considerations around her self-preservation to outweigh considerations about staying in the relationship." For this survivor, an especially severe incident of abuse "gave her the excuse she needed to leave the relationship" (p. 2308). Baly wrote that some survivors she interviewed noted the importance of a specific excuse to end the relationship, especially believed strongly in importance of preserving the relationship. For some victims, turning points were predetermined, such as if they identified experiences that would signify them reaching their limit (e.g., saying they would leave if their partners cheated on them; Baly, 2010). Baly noted that triggers or excuses can help survivors in the leaving process because they help to justify the decision to leave, as well as provide a rationale for ending the relationship to share with others in their lives. As Baly said about participants in her research, "Leaving the relationship seems to have become an option once participants started to have an understanding of the situation and how their needs were not being met, but it did not become a reality until a suitable trigger or excuse was identified" (p. 2310).

Most recently, Catallo et al. (2012) examined the impact of turning points on victims' willingness to disclose IPV to professionals. Catallo et al. suggested that turning points may initiate a process through which survivors evaluate the risks and benefits of disclosing the abuse. The turning points noted by survivors in Catallo et al.'s study included injury during pregnancy, making an internal decision that they wanted to survive, being asked by health care professionals about their abuse, severe incidents of abuse, fear of being killed, and fear of their children being harmed. A turning point may be a precursor to making a change related to the abuse (Catallo et al., 2012), such as leaving or disclosing it to a professional.

Although the existing research provides examples of the critical role of turning points in victims' decisions whether to leave abusive relationships, the existing research is limited. Therefore, a need exists for additional research to further understand the types of turning points that may prompt victims to begin to take steps toward achieving safety. To this end, the purpose of this study was to understand how survivors of past abusive relationship describe any turning points they experienced that led them to end their abusive relationships and seek safety. Phenomenological research methodology was used to identify themes in the types of turning points that they described. In the next section, we describe the methodology of this study.

## Method

The research question guiding this study was, "How do survivors of past abusive relationships describe any turning points they experienced that led them to end their abusive relationships and seek safety?" The current study is derived from a larger study on the processes involved in leaving and

recovering from abusive relationships (Flasch, Murray, & Crowe, under review). In this section, we focus on the methodology used for the specific components of the study that were relevant to understanding turning points in those processes.

## Participants and Recruitment

Participants were 123 survivors of past IPV who had been out of any abusive relationships for at least 2 years. All participants completed an electronic survey, which was hosted on a secure Internet-based survey hosting platform. In order to participate in this study, all participants had to meet the following eligibility criteria: (a) they had been in an intimate relationship that included some form of IPV (i.e., emotional/psychological, physical, and/or sexual abuse); (b) they had been out of any abusive relationships for at least 2 years; (c) they were at least 21 years old; and (d) they were able to participate in the survey in the English language. Participants were recruited through a purposive convenience sampling method. All participant recruitment was done electronically by distributing invitations to participate on social media sites that were relevant to the topic of IPV, through e-mails to personal and professional contacts of the researchers, and through listservs. In addition, snowball sampling was used to ask people who received the recruitment notice to forward the information with others.

Participants' average age was 41.0 years ( $SD = 11.5$ ). Most (95.1%) participants were female, 2.6% were male, and 2.6% listed "other" or did not report. Regarding ethnicity, for which participants could report as many as applied, most (83.7%) participants were Caucasian/white, with the additional percentages as follows: African American/black (4.1%), Asian (0.8%), Hispanic/Latino/Latina (8.9%), Native American (2.4%), and other (3.3%). Participants represented 31 states in the United States, plus the District of Columbia, in addition to 9 other countries or territories. Most (73.2%) participants reported that they had children, and about half (50.4%) reported that they had children with their abusive partners.

Participants described their past experiences with IPV. Participants reported the number of relationships in which they had experienced any form of IPV. The most common response was one relationship (51.2%), and the highest number of reported abusive relationships was five (5.7%). Participants provided additional information about their most recent relationships that included any form of IPV. Most (93.5%) participants reported that their partners were a different sex, and 4.9% had same-sex partners. The average length of these relationships was 8.14 years ( $SD = 6.69$ ). The vast majority (82.9%) of participants reported that they experienced physical abuse in those relationships; 98.4% reported emotional/psychological abuse; and 70.7% of participants reported sexual abuse. Only 37.4% of participants reported that their abusive partners received any legal punishments or sanctions as a result of their abusive behaviors.

## Survey Instrumentation and Procedures

This study used a survey that was designed specifically by the researchers. All participants had to complete an eligibility questionnaire and agree to the informed consent document before they could access the full survey. Three parts of the survey included (a) a demographic questionnaire, (b) a series of questions about their abuse experiences, and (c) a series of open-ended questions about participants' experiences with overcome abuse. The data for this study were derived from the following question included in this third part of the survey: "Some people who have experienced abuse describe what we refer to as a 'turning point.' By this we mean a critical moment when they decided they were going to leave their abusive relationship once and for all. This may not have occurred immediately before they actually left, as the process of leaving an abusive relationship can take some time. Did you have a 'turning point'? If so, please describe that point here, and how it changed you, your views of yourself, and your views of your relationship." Participants were provided with an expandable text box in which they could provide responses of any length to share their experiences related to this question.

## Data Analysis

A phenomenological data analysis process was used because a goal of this study was to identify participants' lived experiences of turning points in relation to IPV (Creswell, 2013). Prior to beginning the data analyses, the researchers bracketed their assumptions and discussed their personal experiences with this topic as a way to identify any potential biases that could arise through the analyses (Wertz, 2005). The assumptions bracketed by the researchers included that the process of recovering from an abusive relationship is an individualized one, that social support and resources impact the recovery process, and that recovery from past abuse is possible.

The data analysis process was grounded in phenomenological research methodology (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Wood, 2011; Moustakas, 1994; Wertz, 2005), through which a hierarchical emergent coding strategy was used. First, the researchers independently engaged in horizontalization, as they read and reread the transcripts and highlighted participants' statements (i.e., meaning units) that were indicative of how participants experienced turning points. Once all three researchers had engaged in this process, they worked together to consolidate the list of meaning units to eliminate duplication. Once a final list was created, the researchers identified themes within the items on the list. From there, the researchers wrote textual and structural descriptions of these themes, which were then used to organize full data set into themes. The goal was to identify the essential invariant structure of the themes in order to capture the participants' common experiences related to turning points in their process of leaving abusive relationships. Steps taken to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings included the following: (a) bracketing the researchers' assumptions prior to beginning the analyses, (b) keeping an audit trail

through the records they kept during the data analysis process, (c) including a broad, geographically diverse sample, and (d) conducting the horizontalization process independently before the researchers compared their lists of meaning units.

## Results

Our phenomenological data analysis process revealed six turning point themes, which were as follows: (a) facing the threat of severe violence; (b) changing their perspective about the relationship, abuse, and/or their partner; (c) learning about the dynamics of abuse; (d) experiencing an intervention from external sources or consequences; (e) realizing the impact of the violence on children; and (f) the relationship being terminated by the abuser or some other cause. In addition, a 7th theme, that some participants did not experience an identifiable turning point, is discussed. For all themes, illustrative quotes are provided below as examples.

### *Turning Point #1: Facing the Threat of Severe Violence*

Turning points in this theme related to participants' specific experiences with violence, especially those they described as extreme or severe. For example, one participant said, "The turning point for me was waking up with a bruise on my neck and even though at the time I did not remember what happened, I knew my then husband had tried to kill me. I knew I had to get the kids and get out." Another shared, "He threatened to throw me off a balcony—something just 'took over in me and even though I was really scared he was going to do it and I wouldn't be able to stop him I said, You will not do that to me. I don't deserve to be treated that way.'" This theme also included turning points when the violence progressed from one form of violence to another, such as when emotional abuse progressed into physical violence. One participant said that sexual abuse led to her turning point: "The turning point in my relationship was immediately after being raped. Although, I was too traumatized to call it 'rape' at the time, I knew that I had to remove myself from the relationship completely." Another said, "My turning point was when the abuse turned physical. It was a gradual turning point." Finally, this theme also included participants' recognition of a pattern of escalating severity in the abuse they experienced. A participant shared the following experience, "He had lied, and the death threats increased, and he started to get more physically violent, punching holes in the wall, blocking me in the hallway. The night I left for good he was throwing things at me." A particularly poignant story shared by a participant within this theme was as follows:

My turning point was the final time that I experienced abuse from my partner. He was in a drunken rage and I was trying to calm him down so that he would not wake up the baby in the other room. He punched me across the face and walked out of my apartment. I locked the door behind him and minutes later he was banging down the door demanding that I let him in. When he realized that I would not he broke the glass in the window to my bedroom and let himself

in. At this point I was calling 911 and he walked to me, snatched the phone and broke it, and threw me on the ground. He got on top of me and was holding me down by my neck and I literally thought that I was going to die. I vowed that at this point if I survived that I would never let him do that to me again. As I am still here . . . he did let me go and ran from the apartment. That was my turning point. I was literally on the verge of losing my life before I reached it. I realized that I deserved so much better than this and that my son deserved better than this.

In sum, the turning point of *facing the threat of severe violence* encompassed both isolated incidents of severe abuse and ongoing patterns of severe and escalating violence that led survivors to take action to seek safety and leave their abusive relationships.

### Turning Point #2: Changing Their Perspective About the Relationship, Abuse, and/or Their Partner

This theme addressed cognitive shifts that occurred for participants related to how they viewed their relationships, the abuse they experienced, and/or their abusive partners. These cognitive shifts may have occurred suddenly or gradually over time, and they may have been related to a spiritual or religious insight. In addition, this theme included participants' recognition of the toll the abusive relationships had taken on their lives, such as a feeling of exhaustion. Some of the participants' quotes that illustrate this turning point are as follows:

- "He had isolated me from my friends, but one day, I went out with them anyway and was shocked at how nicely everyone treated me and that made me realize how cruel he was to me."
- "I realized that my marriage was based on lies. He never cared about me or our son. He only cared about the image: the 'beautiful and successful' wife, the nice house, the beautiful baby. The perfect picture! But it was only perfect as long as he could control me and enjoy the benefits of my financial situation."
- "My turning point was a process that took about 2 years as I gradually became more emotionally healthy and finally got to the point where I realized it was better for me, him and our children for us to separate."
- "I did experience a turning point I felt like I loved myself more than I loved him so it was either him or me. I slowly withdrew myself from the relationship until I felt like I was strong enough to leave."
- "For months after the incident, I continued to communicate with the abuser via text and phone in hopes that somehow I could have justification for what he did. In time, as I realized that there was not justification (because my body doesn't come at a price) . . . At that point, I realized that I just wanted to move forward regardless of the perpetrator's explanations. He was wrong and I deserved the ability to forgive and be happy again."
- "The turning point was more like a switch that went off in my head. I had known for months that I needed to end it, but one day, after a pretty typical verbal tirade by my abuser, the switch flipped and I knew I was done. I was done fighting, done defending myself, done pretending that he would ever get better or change, done with the charade that had become my life. It took six months of planning and preparing before I could actually leave, but that day was my turning point."
- "He was drunk and had a cigarette in his hand. He was pointing his finger in my face. I went to move his hand and his dislocated my finger. I left with my dog and we slept in my car. I knew that it was over. BUT, I continued to have sex with him . . . It took 2 years for me to realize that I was having sex with a monster. The sex became less and less enjoyable and I left for good."

### Turning Point #3: Learning About the Dynamics of Abuse

Some participants' turning points came as they learned about the dynamics of abuse and gained information about abusive relationships. This theme was different from Turning Point #2 because statements reflecting this theme were based on new knowledge or learning specifically about abuse dynamics in general, and then applying that knowledge to their own situation. For some participants, this new knowledge came from reading books, as the following quote illustrates: "I read the book 'The Woman's Room' and realized I wasn't stupid or crazy after all! . . . I realized that there was more to life than what I was experiencing, that I didn't deserve the abuse and I was validated in wanting an education. My husband and I separated for the last time that year." Another participant said, "One of the early steps was reading 'Boundaries in Marriage' by Townsend/Cloud. That helped me see that allowing our relationship to be unequal (one standard for him and another for me) was damaging on all kinds of levels."

Other participants learned about the abuse dynamics from professionals, such as the participant who said, "It was difficult for me to leave because of the consistent suicide threats; the therapist who advised me to leave helped me understand that my partner was likely not going to kill himself, and that if he did it would not be my fault. I also have a friend who works as a crime scene investigator, and she helped me understand the pattern of escalation that my partner was following and the risks that I faced by staying in the relationship." Some participants learned about the dynamics of IPV through their own professional work. As one survivor said, "By this point I had begun working with DV victims and recognized the red flags from my training. I told him I was getting a vibe of power and control that I was not comfortable with and I stopped communications." Overall, these participants learned and applied this information to their lives, as they were able to label their experiences as abuse and therefore take steps toward safety.

#### ***Turning Point #4: Experiencing an Intervention From External Sources or Consequences***

This theme addressed statements about turning points based on interactions with other people, as well as those based on external consequences of the abuse, such as an intervention by child protective services or law enforcement. Some participants' quotes illustrating ways that other people intervened and led them to turning points are as follows: (a) "Another important part was having a close personal friend who made me face the facts of my situation and stop looking at my circumstances thru denial-laced, rose-colored glasses"; (b) "I met someone who loved me and helped me realize that I deserved better"; (c) "I finally broke my silence and called my parents (in another state) and told them how frightened I was. Nobody knew about the years of abuse before because I was ashamed and kept thinking I could fix it or avoid making him so angry. When others who love you tell you that your abuse is just not right or acceptable, it opens the door to getting away"; and (d) "The second biggest influence was my Christian counselor who told me that it was okay for me to divorce. For me, I needed social support and affirmation from members of the Christian community that seeking a divorce was okay and that God didn't want me to futilely suffer." Likewise, participants' comments regarding external consequences that led to turning points included the following statements: (a) "After an aggressive ordeal I rang someone (who had previously told me if there was anything I needed to ring them) not a close person but she drove around to my house and I broke down in the car talking to her. The things that happened after this (calling doctor, police informing health authorities) caused a sequence of events that led to him being barred from the house about 20 days later" and (b) "My turning point was the final day he threatened my life and called the police on me! He told them I was crazy like he had so many times before. But this time the police heard my voice. They told me what I needed to do to help myself and I just needed that guidance, that direction. I went down to the court house and I just never gave up. It's been 3 long years of court battles and threats." The turning points in this category reflect the potential for external people or events to provide consequences of the abuse that lead survivors to reconsider their situations and choose to begin the process of leaving their relationships.

#### ***Turning Point #5: Realizing the Impact of Violence on Children***

Statements in this theme related to turning points resulting directly from participants' realizations about the impact of the violence on their children. Some of these statements reflected participants' views about how their children were impacted by witnessing the abuse, as is illustrated by the following quotes:

- "I left with my daughter when she began exhibiting anxiety at the age of 6 and when he began to throw

things at me and yell in front of her. I had family pick up my belongings."

- "He hit me with the phone in front of our daughter who was crying. He wouldn't let me comfort her."
- "The turning point for me was when I had my first child. It wasn't enough for me to leave when he was abusive to me, but after my daughter was born, I felt like he was disrespecting her too and I would not stand for that."

Other statements in this theme related to participants seeing that their perpetrators were directing violence or abuse toward their children. The following quotes provide examples of this dynamic:

- "I left because he had started to physically abuse my oldest son. I had lost worth in myself and he had made me scared to death of leaving but seeing the bruises on my son was the turning point. I would not promote the cycle of violence no longer. My boys deserved to be happy and no son of mine would grow up and do this to his family."
- "He did exactly what the therapist predicted: he hurt my daughter. NOTHING is more important and precious than my children and the day he hurt my daughter, it was like someone threw aside a curtain and I saw for the first time what the therapist did (probably because I was watching him do to her what he usually did to me)."
- "My turning point was when the abuse began to extend to my son. I knew that was it, my abuser had to go! I love my son and I'm all he has and no one was going to hurt him. Everything became clear and I became strong and I vowed no matter what the consequences that my abuser would never set foot in our house again."
- "When I recognized that my daughter was being abused. Things I would tolerate, I wouldn't tolerate having done to her."
- "My turning point was when my child got physically abused as well and the police came. My children were what made me realize enough was enough."

As the participants quoted in this theme show, some survivors of abusive relationships make decisions to be moving toward safety and ending their relationships when they are confronted with the impact of the abuse on their children.

#### ***Turning Point #6: The Relationship Being Terminated by the Abuser or Some Other Cause***

Turning points in this theme stemmed from abusive partners ending the relationships or otherwise leaving the survivors. In some cases, participants reported that their partners were unfaithful (e.g., "He had an affair for 18 months before I found out. Far as I know, he is still having the affair") or left them for someone else (e.g., "My turning point was when my ex-boyfriend left me for another woman). In other cases, participants noted that their partners had ended the relationship for



unknown causes (e.g. "They left me beforehand) or their partners died.

### **No Identified Turning Point**

Very few participants stated that they had never had a specific turning point. As an example, one participant's story is as follows:

I never had a turning point but always knew I needed to get out of the situation, I just didn't know how without having to move away from my family who was my main support. Therefore I felt 'stuck' in my situation. I thought that because he was in jail, it would be the best time to break it off with him but he was allowed to get out of jail daily to go to work and I was scared, for good reason. He ended up taking off and showed up at my house. That's when he severely beat and stabbed me and ended up going to prison. I think a big problem with people staying with their abusers is the fact that as much as they say we are safe, we are not. I feel that people think if they leave their current situation, as bad as it may be, that leaving might make it that much worse . . . so they stay.

Although it was not common for participants to be unable to pinpoint a specific turning point that led them to end their relationship or otherwise seek safety, it is important to note that not all survivors will have an identifiable turning point that they can describe.

## **Discussion**

This study identified six major categories of turning points that are involved in survivors' decisions to end abusive relationships or begin to take steps toward becoming safe. This study demonstrates the complexity of survivors' decisions to leave abusive relationships, and these decisions may be influenced by a number of factors. These influences can relate to the nature of the abuse (i.e., Turning Point 1), cognitive shifts, or greater awareness on the part of the survivor (i.e., Turning Points 2 and 3), and relational, social, and/or contextual factors surrounding the abuse and the survivors' lives (i.e., Turning Points 4, 5, and 6). In this section, we connect the findings of this study to prior research, describe the study's limitations, and discuss its implications for the research, theory, and practice.

### **Understanding Turning Points in the Process of Leaving an Abusive Relationship**

This study supports findings from previous research about the complexity of victims' decisions whether to leave an abusive relationship. Although from the outside of an abusive relationship, the decision to leave may appear to be the easy, clear choice to make, the experiences of the participants in this study demonstrate the challenges that arise for victims as they consider whether to leave their relationships. As conceptualized in this study, turning points can play a critical role in survivors' decisions to begin the process of leaving an abusive

relationship. However, survivors may vary in how they experience turning points. For some, a singular turning point may lead directly to making changes to leave their relationships. However, other victims may experience a multiple turning points over an extended period of time (Patzel, 2001). Likewise, some victims' turning points may stem from just one of the categories identified in this study, but others may experience turning points from multiple categories.

The unique turning points that influence each victim's choices offer insight into the experiences and psychological processes that may lead them to move toward seeking safety from an abusive relationship. The six categories of turning points identified in this study are similar to many of the turning points and influences identified by previous research. First, extremely severe abuse or increasing severity in the abuse can lead survivors to decide to initiate the leaving process (Panchanadeswaran & McCloskey, 2007). Severe violence also may influence survivors to remain in their relationships if they believe the risks of harm in leaving outweigh the risks involved in stay (Griffing et al., 2002). However, some of the participants' experiences confirm that survivors may reach a point with increasingly severe violence that they become determined to leave, despite the risks involved (Smith, 2003).

Although at times external events trigger a turning point for a victim, some turning points result from internal cognitive shifts, whether they derive from changing their perspectives about their relationships or learning new information about the dynamics of the abuse (Khaw & Hardesty, 2007; Patzel, 2001). In this study, survivors' descriptions of turning points that stemmed from learning information about the dynamics of abuse support the need for ongoing efforts to raise awareness about IPV within client and community populations. The social context surrounding abuse also influences turning points through victims' relationships with others, including friends and family members, community-based organizations and professionals, and their children (Panchanadeswaran & McCloskey, 2007; Reisenhofer & Taft, 2013; Shorey et al., 2013). In this study, some participants had turning points after they received support from friends and family members, and others experienced turning points when they viewed local organizations (e.g., the police or child protective services) as taking action to hold their perpetrators accountable. In addition, although many survivors described turning points related to their children, the influence of children on victims' decisions remains complex (Moe, 2009; Panchanadeswaran & McCloskey, 2007; Smith, 2003). It is notable that some participants in this study reached their limits with the abuse when they saw their children experiencing the same level of harm that they themselves were experiencing. This suggests that some victims' self-value becomes so diminished that they come to view their own safety and well-being as unimportant, even as they remain committed to protecting and supporting their children.

Two unique dynamics of turning points emerged in this study. First, some participants described turning points resulting from their relationships being terminated by their abusers. Although these turning points could be viewed as processes

that happened *to* the survivors and not due to their own choices, these statements were viewed as turning points because the end of the relationships prompted them to realize that they would not return to that or another abusive relationship. Second, some participants stated that they did not experience any identifiable turning points. This finding is important because it affirms the uniqueness of each victim's process in deciding to leave an abusive relationship.

### Limitations

This study's limitations should be considered in interpreting and applying the findings. First, as participants had been out of their relationships for an extended period of time, their memories may have been impacted and not allowed them to recall specific details of their decision-making processes at the time of the abuse. In particular, they may have remembered only the major turning points and not discussed smaller-scale ones they experienced. Second, this study used a phenomenological approach to data analyses, although the data were collected via an electronic survey. Typically, phenomenological research involves interviews with participants, and therefore the opportunity to gain further insights via follow-up questioning was not available. Third, this study was limited by the assessment of turning points from a single question on a larger survey. It is possible that additional questions about turning points would have provided participants with additional opportunities to reflect on their experiences, and they may have provided more in-depth responses through that additional reflection. Finally, the survey instrument specifically used the term "turning points" to describe this experience to survivors, and it also included a definition of this term. This was intended to provide a more objective prompt to which participants could respond. However, providing this term and definition could have biased their responses toward describing their experiences in ways that they believed the researchers were looking to obtain, which may differ from how they would have described their experiences with a more open-ended prompt.

### Implications for Future Research, Theory, and Practice

Despite the limitations of this study, its findings offer implications for research, theory, and practice, especially for counselors who work with clients impacted by IPV.

**Implications for research.** Because the existing research is minimal to date, a need remains for additional research to expand upon our current understanding of the role of turning points in relation to victims' decisions to leave abusive relationships. In particular, because most of the existing research is qualitative, there is a need for more quantitative, psychometrically sound ways of measuring turning points and the dynamics involved in the process of deciding to leave abusive relationships. The six categories of turning points identified in this study could serve as the basis for the creation of an assessment that could be used in both research and practice. Longitudinal

research on the processes involved in victims experiencing turning points to actually leaving would be especially valuable. In particular, longitudinal research involving participants currently involved in abusive relationships could be useful for identifying the turning points that are most likely to translate into behavioral changes. To aid counselors in their work with victims, additional research is needed to examine the most appropriate interventions for victims experiencing different types of turning points, as well as interventions that are useful for helping clients reflect on how their lived experiences might serve as turning points toward making changes toward increased safety. Finally, a need exists for cross-cultural research in order to determine whether and how turning points are experienced differently in different cultural, demographic, and social contexts.

**Implications for theory.** Many counselors are familiar with the TTM (Prochaska & Velicer, 1997) as a contextual framework for understanding how clients make behavioral changes. In light of the limitations to applying this model to the lived experiences of victims of IPV (Alexander et al., 2009; Baly, 2010; Catallo et al., 2012; Cluss et al., 2006; Reisenhofer & Taft, 2013), a need remains for more theoretical refinement of the TTM to apply to this population. Future theoretical refinement is needed to address the ways that turning points lead victims to move from one stage of change to another. However, a major challenge for TTM theorists is to consider more fully how to address how perpetrators' control limits victims' abilities to move toward actual change, even if they desire these changes to happen. For example, a victim may experience a turning point that leads him or her to make a decision to leave the relationship. However, the perpetrator can hinder the victim's progress toward this goal through increased threat of harm. These dynamics and limitations present a major challenge to the application of the TTM to the population of victims and survivors of abuse, and these challenges must also be considered in practice with clients in counseling.

**Implications for practice.** Counselors—especially those who work with couples, children, and families—may encounter clients who are facing IPV. Counselors may struggle to understand victims' choices to remain in an abusive relationship and even stigmatize victims for doing so (Authors, in press). However, it is important for counselors to support clients in making their own decisions about what is best for their lives, even in the context of abuse (Murray & Graves, 2012). Of course, it is imperative that counselors follow all legal mandates (e.g., reporting maltreatment of children or elderly or disabled adults), as well as work to promote safety in their clients' lives (Murray & Graves, 2012). The significance of severe or escalating violence as a potential turning point for victims also calls to the importance of safety planning when working clients are impacted by IPV (Murray et al., in press).

Counselors working with clients currently involved in abusive relationships can help these clients explore their experiences and consider the meaning of those experiences in

helping them make progress toward the goals they have for their lives and relationships. Victims who have recently had significant events or realizations related to their abuse may be in a prime position to reflect upon those experiences and consider what, if any, changes they want to make as a result of them. Of course, clients may not immediately recognize a significant event as a turning point, and even when they recognize them, they may not translate immediately into behavioral changes. Counselors may even want to introduce the idea of turning points to clients who are experiencing abuse, especially by noting the significance of these experiences for other victims and survivors. As always, counselors must respect and honor each client's unique experiences, and this may involve acknowledging that not all clients will experience turning points in their process of deciding to leave and abusive relationship. However, overall, turning points may offer counselors with golden opportunities to help victims of abuse to take action to move toward increased safety in their lives and relationships.

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