

Women, Health and Development Program

Gender and Public Health Series



Pan-American Health Organization
Regional Office of the World Health Organization

PAN-AMERICAN HEALTH ORGANIZATION
Women, Health and Development Program

**Gender and Public Health
Series**

7

HELPING OURSELVES TO HELP OTHERS.
SELF-CARE GUIDE FOR THOSE WHO WORK IN
THE FIELD OF FAMILY VIOLENCE

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San Jose, Costa Rica
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PRESENTATION

The “Gender and Public Health” Series is produced by the Women, Health and Development Program of the Pan American Health Organization/World Health Organization in the sub-region of Central America with the purpose of disseminating different topics of interest which are promoted by the Program. Its goal is to stimulate reflection, analysis and actions from an interdisciplinary gender perspective on public health matters.

Under the auspices of the governments of Sweden and Norway, documents will be published in this Notebook Series which will help consolidate the process that is currently underway in the countries of Central America to incorporate gender considerations into policies and actions of the Health Sector. The content of the Series may be conclusions from workshops, contributions by individual authors and results of research.

The content of the works published and the manner in which the data is presented do not necessarily imply the position of PAHO/WHO's WHD Program on a particular topic.

INTRODUCTION

People who work directly or indirectly with victims or perpetrators of sexual or domestic violence come into contact with pain through listening to and reading stories of incest, rapes, threats, and humiliation. Through medical exams and psychological interventions they see the effects of violence on the victims. Those experiences leave marks.

Violence is a contaminant. It makes one vulnerable emotionally and physically. Even though not all people feel these effects, it is proven that many distance themselves from this type of work, putting up barriers to protect themselves from suffering, agony, and frustration. They feel burdened with acts that seem to deny life itself, solidarity, and trust in human beings, including those most dear. One of the characteristics of family violence is the link of affection or connection between victim and aggressor.

Specialists in the field of domestic violence have studied and investigated the above situations, characterizing various alternatives of response to those effects. Among them, for example: Vicarious Traumatization, or Secondary Trauma; Posttraumatic Stress Disorder; and burnout.

The Pan-American Health Organization's Women, Health, and Development Program asked Cecilia Claramunt, a specialist with broad experience in this subject, to draw up guidelines to train professionals in the health field, from NGOs and other institutions, about how to deal with the effects of being indirect witnesses to vulnerability and human aggression. We feel that this document responds to ethical aspects in connection with the process of development of a Model of Integral Attention to Domestic Violence, that this program has implemented in Central America since 1995.

We hope that this topic is discussed in these countries and that these guidelines serve as an impetus for self-care for health teams so that we can eradicate domestic violence.

MOTIVATION

After many years of working in an organization that deals with the problem of incest, and therefore constantly hearing stories of terror, humiliation, and pain, I began to notice some changes in myself. I frequently felt tired, I suffered from muscle contractions, and I caught cold constantly. I remember that many times upon getting up I would be invaded by feelings of sadness and hopelessness and some story I had heard the day before suddenly would return to my memory. I would watch movies related to the subject, my academic activities revolved around the issue of violence and my social circle was limited to colleagues from work. I felt afraid for my children and I overwhelmed them with care and concern, and I demanded consolation and relief in my relationship with my husband. The issue of incest slowly began to govern my thoughts, my emotions, and my actions.

All of those changes were presenting themselves gradually, almost without my realizing it, until one day I noticed the similarities between my reactions and those of the women that came for my help. I was more focused on their pain and victimization than on their potentials and survival process. This situation became visible to me in a conference by Sara Sharrett on the theory of trauma, when they told us: “Trauma is contagious”.

This book presents some alternatives to combat this “contagion”, because to work with violence and its consequences affects us. To listen to a story of terror and betrayal can make us relive the fear experienced in our own personal histories or question our belief systems about living in a safe and trustworthy world. In any case, when we hear time and time again of the existence of perverse acts committed in settings of care and love and where the circumstances are more alike than different, we begin to feel afraid, insecure, and impotent. Some of us will react with anger toward those who cause these injuries; others will generalize that feeling and will act accordingly to any threat to their own integrity, their beliefs or emotions; and some will defend their own fears, blaming the victims for the violence they have suffered. Also, those who look for self-protection will desensitize themselves to the pain of those who suffer and will listen disconnectedly to their stories: I hear you but I am not paying attention to what you say.

Nevertheless, all of these efforts to protect ourselves will be insignificant when we are exposed to the continued repetition of stories of incest, rape, humiliations, or death threats. Sometimes physical symptoms appear, as in chronic fatigue, constant headaches and backaches, gastro-intestinal problems, and sleep disorders.

Associated with the former, I have seen very well-trained and sensitive colleagues make the decision to abandon the struggle against violence to work in very different fields, like decorating or selling sporting equipment, among other activities that help them to look at life in a less threatening way and, therefore, feel safer and more confident in their relations with other human beings.

To look for alternatives to care for ourselves, without abandoning the utopia of constructing a different world and maintaining our empathy with the pain of those who suffer acts of violence in their lives is a necessary and possible task. In the following pages I will share the results of my own reflections and

those of many other people who have put forth effort in this search. I urge you to read the material not as a summary of finished recipes, but as an additional tool in your own process of self-reflection and growth.

Finally, I want to express my sincere thanks to Rebeca Alvarado, Pablo González, Sally Pérez, and Teresita Ramellini for having accepted to share with us their strategies of self-care and making the third part of this book possible.

Thanks to Life

*Thanks to life that has given me so much,
it gave me two stars and when I open them
I distinguish perfectly black from white,
and in the high heavens your starry backdrop,
and in the multitudes the man I love.*

*Thanks to life that has given me so much,
it has given me the ear that, in all its width,
night and day records crickets and canaries,
hammers, turbines, barking, downpours
and the tender voice of my loved one.*

*Thanks to life that has given me so much,
it has given me sound and the alphabet,
with it the words I think and declare,
mother, friend, brother, and light illuminating
the route from the soul that I love.*

*Thanks to life that has given me so much,
it has given me the course of my tired feet,
with them I walked cities and puddles,
beaches and deserts, mountains and plains,
and your house, your street and your patio.*

*Thanks to life that has given me so much,
it has given me smiles and tears,
so that I can distinguish happiness from grief,
the two materials that form my song,
and your song that is the same song
and everyone's song that is my own song.*

Thanks to life that has given me so much.

Violeta Parra

Part One

What is the Problem?

A central aspect in the topic of self-care of those who work in the field of domestic violence is the recognition of the effects of facing situations daily that involve threats to personal wholeness. To understand these consequences it becomes necessary to propose the following hypothesis:

Premise:

Human beings do not rely on biological, psychological, and spiritual capacity to confront interpersonal violence without consequences.

We can say that, by light of the experiences of those who have lived situations of abuse, today there is a consensus in admitting that acts of great interpersonal violence, including those which occur in loving relationships and families, constitute traumatic events that unchain a huge variety of physical, emotional, and spiritual effects.

In the spiritual plane, Victor Frankl (1996), a Jewish German psychiatrist who lived during the horrors of the genocide of his people in World War Two, the death of his loved ones, and his own torture in captivity. He proposes that a fundamental consequence of the experience of terror is the loss of meaning in one's own existence, which brings with it a feeling of solitude, emptiness and lack of empathy towards other human beings. Using his own experience as a base, he distanced himself from the psychoanalytical positions and those that he identified with in the past and constructed a new paradigm: the radical problem in the loss of the meaning of our life and spirituality is the way of recovering it.

This proposal can be better understood when we look at, for example, the constant desire for death and self-destruction in child prostitutes, the suicide attempts in incest survivors, and the feeling of emptiness and disconnectedness in many abused women.

Traumatic Events:

Destroy the illusion that the human being is formed and sustained by relations with others. They violate the sense of natural and divine order and bring the victim to existential crisis. A predominant feeling is that of alienation, the lack of connection.

Sara Sharratt, 1992

Traumatic events break the belief systems that human beings developed to facilitate our survival in the world of interpersonal relationships. An author named Janoff-Bullman (cited by Sharratt, 1992) tells us that every person relates in the world guided by three fundamental assumptions:

- **The world is a kind place,**
- **The world makes sense, and**
- **Human beings are valuable, capable, and good.**

So, the experience of violence perpetrated by loved ones challenges these assumptions and gives room to new interpretations with emotional and spiritual effects. The person can lose faith and trust in others, act without direction, and feel alone and sad.

Through the combination of theories on stress and trauma we can try to explain the effects of violence and other experiences that threaten a person's wholeness, or integrity. The diagnostic criteria, the DSM III 1990, has indicated Posttraumatic Stress Disorder to refer to, not a mental illness, but rather a combination of symptoms that, victims of violence suffer as a result of exposure to destructive events. It is also applied to veterans, holocaust and atomic bomb survivors, rape, incest, or domestic violence victims. The symptoms are understood to be a normal response to an abnormal situation; that is to say, they are associated with the constant threat of death, repeated brutality, and extreme physical deprivation, among many other similar traumatic experiences.

Faced with so many overwhelming experiences the human being looks to protect itself. To do this the organism enters a state of alert that unleashes a constant and intense emotional tension. Thus, the perception of threat is established when the person identifies that the tools he or she has are not sufficient to deal with the given situation.

UNDER STRESS

The organism functions automatically in the face of threatening situations.

If we want to care for ourselves it is necessary to pay attention to exactly what happens in our bodies

It all begins when we become aware of our feelings of the world around us (interior or exterior), that which receives meaning through the cerebral cortex when we interpret a situation to be threatening or beyond our capabilities and that puts our well being at risk.

This said interpretation directly activates the hypothalamus, a structure located in the center of the brain that sends alarm messages to the hypophysis, which secretes a hormone called ACTH (Adrenocorticotropha) that activates the suprarenal glands, that then release other hormones, among them adrenaline, noradrenaline, and cortisol, responsible for the most visible physical changes or responses.

When we are in the middle of an alarming situation, we need more blood flow to those regions of the body, like the skeletal muscles, that allow us to flee or fight the given situation. For this reason, the heart increases its work, it beats harder, the arteries near the muscles dilate, and the body experiences tachycardia, or rapid heartbeat. As we don't need great quantities of blood for the skin, the capillaries under it close and the person becomes pale and their hands and feet become cold.

With the release of adrenaline various processes take place. Among those that stand out are glycol sis and lipolysis, which produce the biological energy necessary to allow us to face this challenge. The energy increase is derived from a flow of sugar (glycol sis) and fatty acids (lipolysis), sources of energy.

In sustained states of stress, the delactato level increases (a molecule produced in the glycol sis process) in the blood and the accumulation of this substance is what produces the muscular sensation of tiredness.

The automatic response to stress causes a series of physical transformations throughout the whole body, which occur without our knowledge. They range from a variation in pulse and blood pressure, to paralysation of the digestive process, and the increase of gastric acids. This last response is associated with common digestive problems in people subjected to repeated pressure.

Repeated episodes of tension can eventually become harmful, since the body's capacity for normal functioning wears away. If we constantly use energy at the expense of our reserves we will not have available energy. Thus we will experience fatigue more rapidly and we will be at risk of suffering a series of disorders associated with stress. This in itself does not cause illness, but the changes produced alter our immune system and make us more predisposed to physical problems.

Physical symptoms associated with stress :

- changes in appetite
- headaches
- fatigue
- insomnia
- bruxism (jaw tension)
- muscular pain
- back pain
- tension in the back of the neck
- digestive problems
- diminished sexual desires

Wilson, 1997

Emotional symptoms associated with stress :

- isolation
- worry
- nightmares
- anxiety
- loss of enjoyment
- depression
- irritability
- frustration
- loneliness

The stress derived from the explosion of a trauma, classified in the DSM IV as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, manifests itself in a person that has been exposed to a traumatic event, directly or as a witness, and has responded with fear, despair, and horror.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

1. The traumatic event is persistently re-experienced (reaction to struggle), with recurrent and intrusive memories or dreams, with the feeling that the event is happening in the present, with intense discomfort or with physical responses to stimuli that symbolize or remind them of an aspect of the event.
2. There is persistent evasion (flight) of stimuli associated with the trauma and blunting of general reactions, and is evidenced by the efforts to avoid feelings, thoughts, or conversations around the event or activities, places or people that remind them; psychogenic amnesia; the feeling of alienation from others, or of a desolate future.
3. Symptoms related to the activation of the state of alert: difficulties falling or staying asleep, irritability, difficulty concentrating, exaggerated responses to being startled, and hyper-vigilance.

DSM IV Criteria for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

The people who work with victims of trauma are also in contact with the violence and its threat. For example, reading or listening to stories of battered women for more than forty hours a week makes one

assume that the violence is generalized and infinite and this assumption is highly threatening. Constantly listening to stories of violence places us as witnesses, not only to the fear, impotency, and paralysation of the person who has suffered the aggression, but also to the brutality perpetrated by another human being. That is to say, we are witnesses to vulnerability and human evil. The consequence of our presence in the middle of that horror manifests itself in the way we interpret the world and personal relationships and, just as the victim, we may begin to question our assumptions that guide our way of relating to others. In their place, for example, emerge beliefs such as:

- The world is a dangerous place and we should be alert to any threat,
- The world does not make sense, since we cannot find meaning for the widespread violence, and
- The world is full of bad and dangerous people that we should beware of.

Our belief system can also change, especially according to our gender identity. For example, women can identify easily with victims because domestic violence is directed especially against us. Upon becoming aware of the gender gap between victims and perpetrators we are confronted with our own vulnerability. Sometimes we can relive our own history of abuse, or as it happened to me, when faced with women who had experienced sexual abuse by their parents or relatives, we can begin to ask ourselves why we weren't chosen to be victims, and what is the difference. And just as victims blame themselves for the abuse, we can feel as if somehow we are betraying them. Other times, we think our turn could come at any moment.

Neither is it easy for men. They may recognize the malicious acts of other men and question the differences or similarities between themselves and the aggressors. Sometimes they have also been victimized, generally, at the hands of other men. This experience challenges their own identity and thus causes them to look for similarities and differences between themselves and victimized women.

In the search for concepts that identify the processes of change that people who offer help in the domestic violence field experience, the terms Vicarious Trauma or Secondary Trauma were proposed as evidence of the similarity between the direct effects of abuse and those of witnessing abuse.

Signs of Secondary Trauma in work with battered women:

- Feelings of grief towards a client because she has not made the best decisions
- Impatience when she tells her story
- Excessive worry for her safety
- More empathy and identification with the aggressor
- Feeling sad with yourself for not being a better therapist
- Disassociation when listening to a client
- Persuading her that what you think is best
- Not wanting to go to work

Walker, 1993

According to Sara Sharratt (1992), it is very common to experience posttraumatic stress, since one cannot witness tragedy in isolation.

Nonetheless, it should be mentioned that just as not all direct victims experience every symptom that applies to posttraumatic stress, neither do the people who work with them. Despite this, it is

important to recognize our human vulnerability to suffering the effects of violent trauma and take care of ourselves when the first signs appear.

Some authors use another concept to refer to the effects of stress in those who work with abuse. The chosen term is “burnout”, resulting in chronic stress, emotional fatigue, and frustration. Burnout consists of the decrease in the body’s functional response to the demands of daily life as a consequence of using all our energy, even the reserves, without saving enough for ourselves. Burnout is a chronic response to constant emotional tension, not a reaction to occasional crisis.

In 1984 Christina Maslach (cited by Wilson, 1997, p. 227) presented a book on the phenomenon of burnout, interpreting it as the cost of caring. She explained that because of this many people who work in the movement against violence towards women abandon their struggle at a critical point within two years. In this way, she explains, the movement has lost very valuable people to this phenomenon, which she calls insidious.

Risk Factors for Burnout

External factors

Overworked
Lack of independence in defining and completing daily tasks
Lack of input in making political decisions that effect your work

Internal factors

Personal motivation
Self-esteem
Physical response specific to every person
Ability to express emotions

Wilson, 1997, p. 228

Identifying these risk factors helps explain why people respond differently to the same stress.

Burnout does not appear suddenly, but rather it develops over time. With support and self-care it is possible to stop it in its first stages. But if the person

continues wasting their physical and emotional energy it can advance to the final stage and cause them to cease functioning efficiently and to abandon their work.

Wilson (1997, p. 230-231) proposes five phases of burnout:

1. A period of high energy and satisfaction in our work, when we use more energy than we should. This spending of energy brings us to the second phase.
2. The use of our reserve energy is more visible and we begin to experience changes in our work. We begin to observe fatigue and slowness in ourselves.
3. The symptoms of the second phase become habitual and new ones emerge, including physical illnesses and chronic fatigue. The physical disorders can range from a lengthy cold to periods when our immune system doesn’t work for us.
4. Weakened by the physical symptoms, we begin to feel frustrated, isolated, lack of enthusiasm, pessimistic, and depressed. Here our way of helping changes. When we are emotionally exhausted we aren’t able to give of ourselves. Emotional distance serves, furthermore, to protect ourselves from our own tendency of close involvement. From the increased distance we derive an attitude of indifference to the needs and feelings of those who look to us for help. The development of this response frequently leads to depersonalization, since we begin to look at people in more cynical

terms. In this state many experienced people begin to doubt their abilities and feel like failures. Burnout also causes us to feel irritation, frustration, and anger.

5. The fifth and most destructive phase occurs when the person stops functioning in their work. Some people will look for therapy or counseling while others will change their work activities, even leaving whatever type of work demands close contact with others. Other people will struggle with alcohol or drugs. Recovery from this phase is long and difficult.

We can review the phases of burnout in the following manner:

Phases of Burnout

1. Expending a lot of physical and emotional energy
2. Fatigue and slowness
3. Physical illnesses
4. Emotional symptoms
5. Loss of functioning

Wilson, 1997

If you are a person that works in the field of interpersonal violence it is important to stop yourself and reflect on each of the following questions:

Physical changes:

- Do you continually feel fatigued?
- Have you suffered physical changes, such as muscle pain, headaches, back or neck pain?
- Have you had problems that were not present before in falling or staying asleep?
- Do you think you get sick more often?
- Has your sexual drive changed?

Reflection

Are you experiencing any of the above physical changes or any others that you believe are related to your work? If so, what explanations can you suggest for these changes?

Emotional changes:

- Do you often feel irritated or angry?
- Do you react angrily to small inconveniences?
- Do you feel depressed for long periods of time?
- Have you noticed often feeling very frustrated at work?
- Do you become easily irritated with people who think differently than you?
- Do you often wish to change jobs or leave the struggle against violence?
- Do you often feel impotent in front of the people you help?
- Do you frequently feel alone and without support at work?

Reflection

Have you gone through some emotional changes that you think are related to your work? If so, what do you think the causes are?

Changes in your behavior:

- Do you think you frequently choose to act aggressively?
- Have you increased your use of alcohol, medications or other drugs to be able to sleep, relieve anxiety, or feel better?
- Have you isolated yourself?
- Do you explode often?
- Do you feel your ability to function in daily life has decreased?
- Are you overburdened with work?

Reflection

Have you noticed various changes in your normal behavior that you think are related to your work? What explanations can you think of for these changes?

Changes in your spiritual life:

- Do you feel empty and disconnected?
- Do you feel that your work is not worth the effort?
- Has your life lost meaning?
- Do you feel your spiritual life has deteriorated?
- Do you feel your spiritual beliefs and practices have lost meaning?

Reflection

Have you gone through some changes in your spiritual life that you think are related to your work?

Changes in your way of helping:

- Do you often become angry or impatient with those you offer help to?
- Do you feel frustrated when people do not return or don't do what you think is best for them?
- Have you noticed that you are losing your empathy for people who have experienced violence?
- Often, in front of a victim, do you worry about the needs and feelings of the person who hurt her?
- Do victims' stories bore you?
- While listening to a victim's story do you realize you are thinking of something else?
- Do you feel over-worried and take your work home with you? Do you tell your loved ones about the stories of abuse? Do you think about it while making love or when you go out to enjoy yourself?
- Do you overwhelm your loved ones and friends with the needs of battered or raped women?
- Do you have little support in your job?
- Do you have few opportunities to participate in making decisions that affect your job?

Reflection

Have you experienced any of the above changes that you consider important to identify? Do you think there could be others?

If you have answered affirmatively to some of the preceding questions it is important that you stop yourself and reflect on your personal needs. In this way you can carry out some changes. For example, you could be a person who concentrates on the world around you and ignores your inner voice. Well-being, peace, and serenity are human qualities that can only be developed by finding ourselves. For this reason it is recommended, if you have not done so, to begin a process that helps you concentrate on yourself, on the energy that gives life to your body and your spirit.

It is not useful for yourself, nor for anyone else, if your work results in sacrificing your well being. There is no room for sacrifices, your body and your mind will pay for them and you will find yourself demanding the sacrifice of others. There is an old adage that says: Human beings are obligated to be happy, not only for our own benefit, but for those around us.

In this book you will find many guidelines to review and attend to your human needs. Nonetheless, these guidelines do little if we continue to live under the same perspective. Personal transformation is possible when you share the knowledge of yourself. Instead of directing your search to the outside world, begin to look inside, because that is the only true guide that humans have to make good choices and function in this world.

Perhaps you will say that your work is important and valuable and that it is important for the transformation of our reality, and this is true. But I would ask you; does the way in which you focus on your work- not the work itself- allow you to find an intimate and full existence?

To find the balance between our needs and those of others is an urgent need for those who work actively against violence. With this balance we can maintain our optimism and faith, and at the same time continue working with hope and passion. You need to respect and care for yourself and I invite you to read the following pages where you will find suggestions to offer yourself the attention you deserve.

Reflection exercise: Regaining equilibrium

**Just as nature needs equilibrium, so do people.
We need time to be complete people, and that means balance.
We are constantly drained as people. For that reason,
we need to be fed and we need time to digest the food.
To work and to love is better than only working and...
there are other things.**

Anne Wilson Schaefer

Personal comments about the quote:

Observations about Part One

Part Two Caring for Ourselves

Instants

*If I could live my life over
in the next one I would try to make more mistakes
I would not try to be so perfect, I would relax more,
I would be more of a fool than I have been.
In fact, I would take very few things seriously,
I would be less hygienic,
I would take more risks, take more trips,
contemplate more sunsets,
climb more mountains, swim in more rivers,
I would go to more places I have never been,
eat more ice cream and fewer beans,
I would have more real problems and fewer imaginary ones,
I was one of those people
who lived sensibly and prolifically every minute of their life,
of course I lived moments of happiness,
but if I could go back,
I would try to have only good moments
because if you don't know it, that is what this life is made of,
only of moments, don't waste the present.
I was one of those who never went anywhere
without a thermometer, a hot water bag ,
an umbrella and a parachute.
If I could live again, I would travel lighter.
If I could live again,
I would start to walk barefoot in the beginning of spring
and would continue until autumn,
I would take more trips in carriages,
contemplate more dawns, and play more with children,
if I had another time to live
but you see,
I am 85 years old and I am dying.*

Jorge Luis Borges

Chapter One Our History

1. Where do we begin?

If you are a person who works actively against violence and simultaneously practices or experiences some manifestation of interpersonal abuse, it is imperative that you look for help for yourself.

The process of self-care, when we work in the field of domestic violence, begins with healing, when they exist, the wounds of personal abuse.

Each one of us has a history with many and varied experiences of interpersonal violence. But also, and in a way specific to our work, it can consist of isolated or repeated situations of sexual, emotional, or physical aggression in relationships where we expected to find security, trust, and especially, love.

We can say, nonetheless, that in our history we not only find experiences of victimization, but there can also be isolated or repeated situations where we have acted violently towards other human beings.

Parallel to these said experiences we have developed an interpretive frame that understands them and gives them meaning. This frame includes beliefs, assumptions, and attitudes (mental map) about our self-concept and the world around us.

In this way our experiences, and the mental map we use to give them meaning, influence, sometimes negatively, our personal development and the direction of our work.

For example, when the helping person has experienced some debasing abuse without having worked it out, he or she may feel overwhelmed and paralyzed upon hearing the testimony of another victim. Finding themselves unable to solve their own problem, they cannot effectively help someone else. Unresolved problems can make it difficult to meet the needs of other people. Under these circumstances those who provide services to victims or perpetrators may direct their own pain towards the other person and use him or her to solve their own problems.

Some years ago, I met a therapist who worked part time with abused women. At the same time, her partner was physically abusing her. For this reason she was looking anxiously for some help or alternative for him. This woman continually forced herself to fight to maintain the relationship because she knew that divorce was a sign of failure in her family and they would all tell her that it would harm the children. She told me that other women's stories made her feel very bad because they confirmed for her the danger in which she was living. At the same time, her help did not focus on the needs of her clients, but in how to convince them to "not throw in the towel" and to keep trying because soon they would be rewarded for their struggles.

Working with abusive behaviors also can leave us affected by our unresolved history of victimization. For example, we can pour out our anger towards the people who are looking for an alternative to change their behavior and lose out on the possibility of effectively controlling repeat offenses. In the same way, those who have a history of violent conduct can justify violent acts as a way of also justifying their own violence.

There are many ways in which personal history affects or negatively influences our work against domestic violence. For this reason it is very important that you explore your life and answer the following questions:

- Have you experienced some form of abuse in your life related directly or indirectly to your field of work?
- During your childhood did you live in an abusive situation either inside or outside your family? Was the situation isolated, repeated, or prolonged?
- Have you been a victim of incest, rape, or sexual harassment?
- Have you experienced abuse in your relationships, including during dating?
- Do you consider yourself a victim of some other form of abuse not mentioned here?
- Have you witnessed the abuse of another person without being able to help them?
- Do you feel that any of the above situations negatively effect your work?
- Do you think your clients' stories effect your own history of pain?

If you have responded affirmatively to any of the above questions, it is important to recognize the need to work out your history. If you have already done that, congratulations. If not, encourage yourself to heal and look for help from capable people in who you can freely trust.

The search for help and healing past wounds or resolving a present situation not only benefits you directly, but will also result in a positive change in your task of helping others. In this respect it is useful, as Dr. Lenore Walker (1995) recommends, to recognize our responsibility to have a satisfying and gratifying private life so that we do not look to our clients to satisfy our personal needs.

I grant myself what I need and want
I can look for help in others
I allow others to lend me a hand

Sue Patton Thoele

In a similar way, if you have committed some type of abuse against another human being, it is important that you do not continue to provide services to victims or perpetrators until you explore and change the justifications that have enabled you to commit such aggressions, stop your violent behavior, and control the risk of re-offending.

2. Some ideas to work out our personal history

We begin by identifying the present situations that increase the risk of danger to your physical integrity: the experience of abuse or its threat (including the risks associated with domestic violence work); suicidal ideas and self-destructive behavior, such as alcohol abuse, medications or other drugs, and

unsafe sexual practices. There may also be other circumstances specific to your life that merit an immediate response in order to maintain a healthy life.

Creating Safety

Safety is the experience of being protected from danger and harm. In a safe environment we can be relaxed and be ourselves because our well-being is assured. We feel free to take manageable risks towards growth and change. When we begin to speak honestly about our own lives in a safe space, improvement occurs.

Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, 1995

Your life is very important and so is keeping it in good condition. Given some of the dangerous circumstances, you can begin to make a safety plan.

Personal Safety Plan

Having a plan for emergency situations means having an ordered and systematic strategy to resort to when you need it. If you don't have one I suggest you start with the following list, to which you can add other things, according to your own experience.

Tasks

- a. Identify the source of danger and its signs of onset.
- b. Look for a safe place where you feel protected from other people or from yourself. This place can be a shelter, a friend or relative's house, or inside your own house, a space where you feel good and, if it is the case, in privacy.
- c. Have on hand a list of telephone numbers to ask for help when you feel in crisis or you perceive that your life is in danger. If you do not have a phone, find a way to send a message to a neighbor or to notify the police.
- d. Also have on hand documents, medicines, or other things that you may eventually need in an emergency.
- e. If you have children or people who depend on you, identify if the source of danger could extend to them and look for alternatives for their safety.
- f. Build a support network
- g. Share your needs for confronting this danger with other people. This will make it necessary to identify people in which you trust freely, like friends, relatives, a therapist, or a program that assists in crisis situations. If the source of danger is directly related to your field of work it is important to share your fears and look for options to deal with them.

Other steps you feel are necessary to establish your own safety plan are:

Remember that breaking the silence and looking for help are important for your personal safety.

I have often seen how some people who work with domestic violence refuse to share or ask for help for their own abuse from people who have recovered from abuse, denying the opportunity for finding support in experienced and sensitive people. There can be various and combined reasons. For example: The fear of being considered unable to recover from the problem of violence, feelings of shame, the need to be self-sufficient, the fear of rejection, or the belief that to ask for help is to admit weakness.

If this is your situation, it may be beneficial to review your belief system around asking for help and the emotions or feelings that come out of these beliefs.

In the same way, if you are already receiving help it is important to review your feelings and beliefs around the relationship you have established with the other person, since sometimes the ideas and emotions given above can make it difficult to achieve your objectives in that relationship. For example: Do you sometimes find yourself evaluating the kind of support the other person is offering you and compare it to what you would do in a similar situation? Have you come to realize that your therapy sessions resemble theoretical discussions about a problem? Do you talk more about what you think rather than how you feel? Are you worried about what the other person thinks about your recovery in light of the movement against violence?

Affirmative answers to these and other similar questions could be an indication that you need to take time to meditate about what you are feeling around your need for support. That does not mean we should assume a critical position towards those who offer us their help. Remember that every human being, including you, has the right to count on someone who is offering us a hand in friendship in times of need. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness but rather an expression of the firm conviction that the world is sustained by human connection.

My whole life I have internalized that asking for help means:

The personal experiences that we should take into account for the self-care of those who work with the problem of domestic violence include those that represent an eminent danger to our physical safety, but also those past events that, although they are not a threat to our present lives, work against our personal well-being and the quality of our work. I am referring specifically to the unresolved histories of abuse directly related to the manifestations of violence in our work: child abuse in our families, any situation of sexual exploitation, or domestic violence.

Our histories deserve to be worked out with the aim of managing our lives without guilt, shame, and fear, common feelings in those who experience these types of events. If you have already put the abuse in perspective, if it is no longer a problem, or if there are no situations in your life that need to be healed, you can go on to the next chapter.

Below are some suggestions for dealing with child abuse and past experiences of domestic abuse, which still have not been dealt with and are a negative influence in your present life.

There is a common group of negative feelings and ideas in victims of violence. It is important to identify the presence of some or all of these to have more clarity about the way you have responded to the abuse you suffered.

Common feelings or emotional reactions in victims:

- **Guilt:** When we are the target of some form of abuse (especially if this occurs in the family or in an intimate relationship) we may develop the idea that we have done something bad, wrong, or inexcusable. This feeling is related to the belief that the past (our bad actions) is inevitable and it determines the future (the consequences of these acts). For this reason, the person believes they deserve, and sometimes expects, a desolate future.
- **Shame:** As blame increases, the belief that we are bad people (with the contribution of manipulation from our abuser) also develops (self-concept). This feeling can accumulate over time and contribute to the formation of a personal identity based on stigma and lack of self-respect.
- **Fear:** Related not only to the fear that the violence will be repeated, but also to the belief that if it does happen it is a punishment for our own actions. Guilt and shame contribute considerably, with the idea that we are not people deserving of love.
- **Helplessness:** Given the unequal power relationship that generally accompanies domestic violence, the behaviors or attitudes created to stop the abuse are mostly insufficient and ineffective. Helplessness is the result of knowing that “nothing that I do brings about the result I want”, meaning, I don’t see the connection between my actions and the result. This emotion increases as other things happen where we also do not have control. Helplessness can be exacerbated when we hear stories about other people in similar situations.
- **Anger:** Abuse is unnatural and, therefore, we react against it. We may feel anger towards the person who humiliates, threatens, or betrays us because as human beings, such behavior is contradictory to well-being and actualization. But expressing anger in vulnerable relationships can be highly dangerous and the person should perhaps disguise it, deny it, or contain it. Accumulated anger risks overflowing and extending to other people and situations.

Reflection

The first step in bravely confronting our negative feelings is to recognize them. Sit comfortably and close your eyes. If you want, you may listen to soft, relaxing music or burn some incense.

Think about your personal history and focus on memories related to abuse you have experienced and ask yourself these questions:

1. What situation makes you most uncomfortable? Describe it...
2. How do you feel now thinking about it?
3. Is it hard for you to express your feelings?
4. Are those feelings exacerbated by your work?
5. Is there someone with whom you can freely express how you feel?
6. Do you believe there is a way to fight fear and helplessness?

Construct positive affirmations around your feelings of anger, guilt, shame, fear, and helplessness.

1. To be afraid of..... is one thing, but to allow this fear to turn me into its puppet is another.
2. I am strong enough to confront my.....
3. Today I will try to not let myself be knocked down by.....
4. Today I will not blame myself for.....
5. Today I will love my.....for not feeling ashamed.
6. Today I will freely act how I feel in front of.....

Distorted thoughts:

Our thoughts are many times the consequence of the map of thoughts that is developed by a constant and endless interior dialogue with ourselves. I have read that humans have between approximately 700 and 1000 thoughts daily that constitute a private interpretation of what happens in our reality. Although we rarely pay attention to the way we make sense of an experience, these thoughts are a powerful influence on our feelings and chosen behaviors.

Aaron Beck, an author on cognitive theory, has investigated the nature of thoughts and offers a conceptualization around this inner dialogue, by the name of “automatic thoughts”, because they emerge as if they were a reflex, without reflection or previous reasoning. The thoughts we use in our inner dialogue or automatic thoughts have various characteristics: they use few words, they are believed and thus, not doubted, they are spontaneous and sometimes misleading, stereotypical, frequently are

expressed in terms of “shoulds”, they may be catastrophic (dramatizations that bring about anxiety), and all are learned in the social environment around us (McKay and others 1988, p. 19-21).

One of the principle problems associated with thoughts are distorted automatic ideas or thoughts, which can include the belief of being a different person (in a negative way), of being holders of terrible secrets, and being undeserving of affection and caring. These beliefs contribute to pessimistic views of reality and the possibility of healing and self-realization.

Types of Distorted Thoughts

- Tunnel vision (that magnifies the negative)
- Extremist or polarized thought; there is no middle ground
- Absolute statements (never, no one, always, none)
- Pessimistic or catastrophic views
- Falsely believing you are omnipotent and responsible for everything that happens around you
- Falsely believing that our happiness depends on the actions of those around us (I would be happy if.....changed), forgetting that the only change we can control is related to ourselves
- Generalized labels. Lumping together one or two characteristics, ignoring whatever evidence to the contrary, labeling, for example, those who do not share our views.
- False blame: making others responsible for our choices and decisions
- “Shoulds”
- Always having to be right, not being open to other positions, being on alert to defend our positions
- Waiting to be compensated for our sacrifices by some divine power

Matthew McKay and others, 1988

Reflection

Review the list of automatic thoughts and compare it to your belief system around violence and abuse.

Make a list in order of importance of the distorted thoughts you would like to transform. At the same time write the phrase with which you would like to combat them.

Exploring and transforming the thoughts and feelings linked with a history of abuse is not enough to heal from it. It is necessary to integrate the body into the freedom process. Equally, this requires that you find some meaning for this experience in your life project and for that it is important to review any other alternative that might be useful to you. You can look for help in a therapist trained in traumatic situations, a support group or self-help group, spiritual counseling, books on self survival, body therapy, art therapy, or others that are available in your community.

Recommended literature for healing from abuse:

The Courage to Heal. Guide for Female Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse. Helen Bass and Laura Davis. Barcelona: Ediciones Urano, S.A., 1995

Our Inner Child. John Bradshaw. Buenos Aires: Emece Editores, 1992

When Love is Hate. Men Who Hate Women and the Women Who Keep Loving Them. Susan Forward. Mexico, D.F.: Editorial Grijalbo, 1987

Behave Yourself! Healing Our Inner Child- How to Go From Family Commands to Personal Choices? Matilde Garvich. Buenos Aires: Ediciones De La Persona

Surviving the Pain. A Book For and About Adult Victims of Child Abuse. Eliana Gil. California: Launch Press, 1990

Women Who Love Too Much. When You Always Want and Wait for Him to Change. Robin Norwood. Buenos Aires: Javier Vergara Editor, S.A., 1996

Reflection exercise: Learning to care for yourself

“Caring for oneself is one of the primitive ways of showing love for oneself and for others. It is a learned behavior; we learn to care for ourselves from our own care givers. If you were not loved, encouraged, or comforted when you were a child, or if you were raised like a typical girl, the concept of care may be strange for you. If no one ever showed you gentleness or tenderness, or you were abused in the name of love, you may feel confused about what self-care means... Feelings of guilt or shame can prevent you from feeling that you deserve to be cared for by yourself or any other person.”

Ellen Bass and Laura Davis

Personal comments about the quote

Observations of Chapter One

Chapter Two Caring for our Body

This chapter deals with some alternatives for caring for our bodies, which can be worked on individually or collectively. Either way you will find benefits for yourself. The important thing is to encourage yourself to make changes in the routine in your life and to change the perspective through which you have viewed and treated your body.

Human beings are interconnected and inside us there is a constant exchange of energy. Earlier it was thought that the atom was the smallest particle in the universe. However, Einstein and his colleagues discovered the existence of particles even smaller that spin constantly at high speed in empty space. Seen through high-powered lenses, we can see that those subatomic particles are not solid matter, but energy vibrations. Physicists have demonstrated that everything that exists in the universe is a field of energy and the absolute limits between objects are merely optical illusion. So, everything we see around us (a table, a star, a tree) is interconnected by infinite energy fields. As we are part of this universe, we also belong to a unified and complete field of energy. The force that moves every thing and being is inside us at all times.

These discoveries change our way of interpreting the body, besides being made up of matter, it is also a field of interchanging universal energy. In eastern medicine this concept of mind/body is called Ayurveda, the way to reach higher levels of health.

Your body and your thoughts also function in unison. Penetrating your body space and getting to know its language permits you to understand nature and its cognitive scheme. We are unique, multidimensional, and integral beings. Do not underestimate the voice of your body. Concentrate on it and learn to listen to it.

An old Indian adage says:

If you want to know what your thoughts were like yesterday,
look at your body today.

If you want to know how your body will be tomorrow,
look at your thoughts today.

Deepak Chopra, 1996, p.163

It is crucial that you enter your body, the dimension that allows you to establish communication with the world around you. Take charge of exploring it, caring for it, and spoiling it because it is the only one you have. You don't have to ask

permission from anyone to do this.

For example, right now, how does your body feel? Heavy, light, tired, relaxed? What places seem particularly tense or painful? In what ways do you find it strong and full of energy? Which parts of your body deserve more attention? Are you satisfied with the way it works? Is it a pleasure to live in it? Or, rather, is it like a feelingless shape and a heavy load?

Our principle physical universe, the body, is the home of our spirit, the base for everything that happens to us.

By getting in touch with your body's energy you learn to detect and perceive the messages that your body transmits. According to an Eastern philosopher, the energy that flows in the universe and inside us is responsible for the interconnection between all existing things and beings. It moves in our body in a circular motion by way of a system of spinning circles that go from the head to the feet, feeding the whole organism. When the energy does not spin freely (because of stress, automatic thoughts, negative feelings, poor nutrition, traumas, and other things) the body "feels" the problem and transmits it by a series of signals.

Is your body sending you a signal of alarm right now?

If the answer is yes, your body is sending you, in its language, a warning to take care of yourself.

One of the simplest ways of getting in touch with the body and obtaining the benefits of relaxation is by practicing breathing exercises.

1. Breathing Exercises

To stay alive we have to breathe. Respiration is a source of energy. In Chinese culture, it is believed that the universal energy circulates in us through respiration. By inhaling we receive strength, and by exhaling we empty out our feelings, thoughts, and all that we have inside us. Thus, by breathing we purify and revitalize our body.

This interpretation of breathing is very useful when we feel tired and tense, because to visualize the interchange of energy we concentrate on this action (which usually takes place automatically) and we transform it into a conscious healing tool. A few minutes of deep, balanced breathing is an excellent strategy for relaxation.

Practice the following exercises:

- Take a few minutes of your time every morning to get into a routine of long and deep breaths (you can do it when you feel tense and fatigued). Do them preferably in a quiet room, in a comfortable position, and with your eyes closed. Inhale from the abdomen and diaphragm, hold the breath for a few moments and then exhale. The key to success is that this should not require any effort from you.
- When you do deep breathing visualize the energy that enters and leaves your body as a possible mechanism for purifying and refilling the energy in your body. You may assign a color to this energy, one that you feel is associated with your needs.
- Fill your breathing exercises with images. For example, when you inhale, focus the energy on parts of your body that are in pain or tense, carry it throughout the body, move it along the

spinal column. Fill yourself with strength and grace. Imagine yourself as a shining center of light and peace. Also imagine the exhalations as tools to liberate yourself from pain and upsetting feelings. You can also exhale the suffering left in you by clients today. Tomorrow you will be better able to hear new stories.

Another way of balancing and harmonizing your body's energy is through physical exercise.

2. Physical Exercise:

Try to exercise in a systematic way. If you are a sedentary person it is important that you make some changes in your daily routine. Dedicate time to keep your body in good shape so that you will feel more vitality to function in your daily life.

The object of daily exercise is not losing weight, sweating, or exhaustion. On the contrary, it is a recommended strategy to get more energy (not to spend it), eliminate toxins and impurities, and strengthen the link between your body and your thoughts.

How to do it:

- Look for opportunities offered in your community: gyms, swimming, dance, walking, yoga, tai chi, or a good group of friends to walk or run with without exhausting yourself, among many other things. If there are none of these possibilities or you prefer to establish a personal routine, you may choose to walk or do posture exercises every morning.
- Choose one or two of these things that are pleasurable to you according to your needs and budget.
- Establish a routine
- Keep to it

3. Adequate nutrition

Good nutrition is the base for good physical condition that allows you to have enough energy to function every day and in times of emergency. It may be useful to follow these recommendations:

- Make a list of all the food that you have eaten in the last week (during meals, parties, when you went out, including snacks and drinks) and evaluate the balance in your diet. If you find problems:
- Make a nutrition plan that includes a rich and balanced diet.
- When you sit down at the table, put your food on dishes that are pleasant to look at.
- Allow yourself enough time to eat breakfast and bigger meals, eat sitting down, and while you eat do not do other things like read or watch TV.
- If you often have to eat in restaurants or food stalls, choose ones that offer balanced meals that are low in saturated fats.
- Choose to drink water instead of bottled soft drinks.
- Don't consume too much salt or refined sugar.

- Try not to combine meal times with work.
- Avoid those foods that are bad for you.
- Try to eat your meals in good company, with people you like, who appreciate and respect you.
- If you have a problem linked to nutrition (obesity, underweight, or some type of disorder) look for specialized help.

4. Sleep and rest:

Do you sleep the number of hours that your body needs daily to restore its energy? Do you rest enough when you feel tired, drained of energy, or sick? If your answers are affirmative, I congratulate you and urge you to keep doing it. If not, you are playing with fire since neglecting your health puts your body at risk for physical problems and burnout. If it is difficult for you to get to sleep, perhaps drinking warm milk or doing breathing or relaxation exercises before going to bed would help.

5. Some exercises for relaxation, healing, and increasing energy:

- **Gentle, relaxing massage with essential oils:** Massage is much more than the pressure from hands and fingers; it is a form of communication with our body. If it is done with oils extracted from plants and resins, it can be a very good healing and balancing alternative. It is one of the many ways to practice aromatherapy, or healing using the concentrated energy inside plants. For example, in this form of healing, the essence of lavender is one of the most appreciated oils for its known calming power. Aromatic baths are another way of combining the use of oils and enjoying the pleasure of a bath; you can pour them in the bathtub or rub them on your skin and wrap up in a thin sheet.
- **Therapy with scents:** Also part of aromatherapy. Using a vaporizer, mix a few drops of your preferred oil in a little hot water and you will obtain a pleasant and healing aroma. You may combine this with your therapy sessions, exercise, or meditation.
- **Bioenergetics:** A strategy that offers, through different techniques, the possibility of discovering your body and achieving a new quality of life. It is basically a method of relaxation that combines exercise with breathing to make contact with the outside and inside world, eliminate physical and psychic blocks, and restore harmony. Ask about available places in your community to learn this excellent practice.
- **Music therapy:** Just as aromas have the potential to balance or disturb, so do sounds influence our lives. They have the ability to stimulate our auditory sense and provoke different cerebral reactions. In the market you can now find a large variety of specialized CDs or cassettes, generally associated with the sounds of nature.
- **Acupressure:** A healing system that began more than six thousand years ago in ancient China that then spread to other parts of the east and today is recognized and used in the majority of countries in the western world. It consists of using the pressure of the fingers on specific points

(we all have about 700 acupressure points) to stimulate and balance the energy through the whole body, alleviate pain, and find the body's own potential for healing.

- **Relaxation exercises:** The steps to follow to begin a relaxation exercise generally include: a quiet atmosphere; an object, word, or sound repetition; the constant effort to let pass whatever thoughts or worries distract you; and a comfortable position. A progressive relaxation technique follows. You may read it aloud, tape record it, and then practice it.

Learning to relax

First day: The first day is designated to learning to relax the muscles of your hands, forearms, and biceps. You should do the following exercises three times a day.

Position yourself in a comfortable position. Squeeze your right hand into a fist as hard as you can and note the tension in your fist, your hand, and your forearm. Now release it. Note the relaxation in your hand and appreciate the contrast in tension. Repeat this one more time with the right hand. Repeat the pattern two times with the left hand, then do it twice with both hands at the same time. Next bend your elbows and tense the biceps, then relax and note the difference. Repeat two times. Note the feelings of heaviness, heat, or tingling in your arms. These are normal. While you relax try to say to yourself, "I am removing the tension... I feel calm and rested... I am relaxing and extending my muscles". This mental reinforcement will greatly facilitate physical relaxation.

Second day: Today we will relax the head, neck, and shoulders. Pay special attention to the head, given that from the emotional point of view the most important muscles in the body are in the head. It is here where the majority of people lock their tension. Repeat the arm exercises from the first day and continue with the following:

Wrinkle your forehead as hard as you can. Relax and loosen it. Scowl and note the tension created. Let go and allow your eyebrows to regain their position. Close your eyes and squeeze your eyelids as hard as you can. Relax your eyes until they are closed gently and comfortably. Now tighten your jaw. Relax it until your lips are slightly separated. Really notice the difference between relaxation and tension. Press your tongue against your palate. Relax. Purse your lips in the form of an "O" and relax them. Enjoy the relaxation of your forehead, scalp, eyes, jaw, tongue, and lips. Shake your head from the nape of your neck, as much as is comfortable, and feel the tension in your neck. Rotate it gently to the right, then to the left. Note the change in the location of tension. Straighten your head and look forward, pressing your chin to your chest. Feel the tension in your throat and the tautness in the back of your neck. Relax and allow your head to be in a comfortable position. Allow the relaxation to intensify. Shrug your shoulders up as much as possible, keeping your head down between your shoulders. Relax. Let them fall and feel the relaxation spread through the neck and shoulders. Repeat the sequence.

Third day: Today we will direct our attention to the chest, stomach, and lower back, noting how accumulated tension in these areas affects breathing and how with a long, held breath you can relax them. Repeat the exercises from the first two days and continue with the following:

Get in a comfortable position and relax. Inhale and completely fill your lungs with air. Keep them full and note the tension. Now exhale, letting your chest soften and relax, allowing the air to whistle as it is exhaled. Continue breathing slowly and calmly a few times, feeling how the tension leaves your body with each exhalation. Then tighten your stomach and inhale deeply, withdrawing your hand. Hold your breath a moment, then exhale, feeling the relaxation when the air whistles out. Now arch your back without excessive effort. Keep the rest of your body as relaxed as possible. Concentrate on the tension in your lower back. Now relax as deeply as you can. Repeat the whole sequence another time.

Fourth day: Finally we will learn to relax the thighs, buttocks, calves, and feet. Add the following exercises to those from the first three days:

Get into a comfortable position. Squeeze your thighs and buttocks, pressing your heels in as much as you can. Relax and note the difference. Point your toes to tense your calves. Observe the tension, then relax. Point your toes up towards your face, placing the tension in your shins. Study the tension, then relax. Feel how heavy and relaxed your legs are. Repeat this sequence two more times (McKay and others, 1988, p. 90-92).

Example of a Tai Chi exercise

This should be done preferably in the open air, in contact with nature

- Relax your body and eyes
- Stand with your weight equally distributed over both legs
- Gently bend one knee then the other
- Concentrate on the energy of the universe, the light from the sun, and the stars
- Relax your fingers and move them gently in a circle with your palms up (in the receiving position) and out from your body
- Visualize the light and energy of the universe, earth, sun, and stars entering your body through every finger
- Imagine the energy penetrating and filling all the spaces in your body
- Repeat the following affirmation: "I am a field of energy, I am connected with all that exists"
- Breathe deeply, open your eyes, and reflect on the exercise.

- **Yoga and Tai Chi:** The practice of yoga is highly recognized and available in our region, but I am particularly passionate about Tai Chi or "meditation in movement". This is an ancient system recently popularized in the west, and its goal is developing health, harmony, and inner energy. With the gentle, fluid, and relaxed exercises of Tai Chi, connect the mind to the body, the interior with the exterior, your own existence with nature, and learn to enjoy the beauty and grace of your body.
- **Meditation or prayer:** These also constitute important strategies for connecting your body and your mind with the

universal energy. There are various ways to practice meditation, the most well-known being Transcendental Meditation, or TM.

Transcendental meditation is a subjective practice that teaches us to part with our personal experience. To do it, it is recommended to go to a specialized place.

Prayer is a centuries-old practice used more frequently in mysticism, but actually it has been often confused with the prayers of organized religions. On the contrary, prayer is a way of interior recollecting to reach union with God. As an example of this, a priest in the Orthodox Church states:

Prayer

You should create an immense silence around you to be able to reach the deepest silence in the deepest part of yourself. Constant prayer, repeating the same words of praise to the Lord is what permits one to pray. Do not try to see God, but to be in God. It is not easy to contain in the narrow limits of your body the infinite spirit that always tries to escape...

Benson, 1977, p. 102

Why is it called Transcendental Meditation?

The term is crucial, although it has not been well understood. "Transcend" literally means to go "further". The mind learns to go further than the "sound" of thought to a silent, peaceful, and whole place. Transcend illness to look for health. Although meditation has been surrounded by mysticism for many centuries, in the background lies the very practical and not so mystical process of Transcendence. It is the surest way to open a channel of healing in your mind

Deepak Chopra, 1996, p. 185

6. Professional evaluation of your physical condition

Besides evaluating what you feel and perceive, it is important to have a physical exam done. It should include, at the minimum, the evaluation of the main risks associated with your age, gender, and personal history.

Steps:

On: _____, I will go to or call _____, whose phone number is _____ and I will make an appointment for a general physical exam.

On: _____ I will go to or call _____, whose phone number is _____ and I will make an appointment for a gynecological exam.

On: _____ I will go to or call _____ whose phone number is _____ and I will make an appointment for _____.

If your doctor finds a problem do not delay in taking care of it. Authorize yourself the time to attend to yourself. Look for various ways to care for and improve your health.

Reflection

In terms of caring for my body, I promise myself to:

Recommended literature for caring for our bodies:

Relaxation. Herbert Benson and Miriam Klipper. Barcelona: Editorial Pomaire, 1977

Perfect Health. Deepak Chopra. Buenos Aires: Javier Vergara Editor, S.A., 1996

Aromatherapy. Practice Book. Marcel Lavabre. Mexico, D.F.: Lasser Press, 1995

Easy Guide to Bioenergetics. A New Method to Eliminate Blocks and Tension. Alosha Schwarz and Ronald Schweppe. Barcelona: Robin Book, 1998

Essential Techniques for Well-being. Practical Manual for Self-Healing Through Affirmations, Visualizations, and Aromatherapy. Louise Taylor. Barcelona: Robin Book, 1997

Reflection exercise: The body

Quotation

The human body, my body, cannot be manipulated or treated like other things. I can observe, watch, study, use it..., but ins ofar as I consider it identical to me, the personal pronoun put before the verb, itself personified: I watch, I observe, I study. I cannot distance myself from it the way I can with other things, because my body is my own presence, it is what makes me appear to others, not to merely be seen, but to confirm my existence to myself first.

Maria Jose Lopez

Chapter Three

Getting in touch with our feelings

It is good to feel whatever you feel. Emotions are neither good nor bad. They simply are what they are. No one can tell you what you should feel. It is good and necessary to talk about emotions.

John Bradshaw

Our culture has taught us that feelings are negative and dangerous, that we should control them in order to be rational and logical. This lesson seems to me to be in accordance with patriarchy and contributes to the enormous difficulty we have in recognizing and identifying our own emotions.

Our feelings are part of human nature in its eagerness to perpetuate itself, they constitute a natural system of information from our internal world and the reality that surrounds us. For example, pain alerts us to danger, love connects us with ourselves and with others, tenderness leads us to protect those more vulnerable, and anger confronts us with injustice, and we can say this about every human emotion. Nevertheless, our socially learned ideas or mental map can lead us to distorted or confused interpretations about our emotions and the correct or incorrect ways to express them.

We have been able to hear statements such as these in our lives:

- Anger is bad and good women do not get angry.
- Tender men are effeminate.
- Don't cry; people will take advantage of you.
- Never show how you feel.
- Don't show anyone your love.
- Feelings are women's things.
- Control your anger, it can do you harm.
- If you want to be successful, control your feelings.
- Control your happiness. Don't laugh too much.
- You have no reason to be sad.

You have probably heard these and similar statements thousands of times, and they may be influencing your ability to recognize and express what you feel now.

Phrases I have heard about the danger in feeling and expressing feelings:

To deny our feelings distances us from ourselves. When we do not accept that feelings are part of human nature, we strive to be inhuman. It is important to accept and validate our emotions as a marvelous gift of life that is looking to perpetuate itself.

When we get out of touch with our feelings, or when we don't accept them as a valid expression of our experience, we begin to also lack the words to describe them. To turn our backs on our nature makes us vulnerable.

The reasons to disqualify the world of emotions are varied and diverse. Among them we can cite:

1. *Emotions are unnecessary.* Our culture idolizes rational thought and rationality is a characteristic associated with masculinity. So, the masculine is the human prototype and norm (at least for progress, science, politics, and success). Women, from this point of view, may be emotional and sensitive, but these characteristics are considered deviant. So emotions expressed by men, principally those that have to do with tenderness, fear, and love, are considered signs of weakness. At the least, it can be argued that feelings are unnecessary for success.
2. *There are good and bad feelings.* Although emotions are identified with the female gender and it is more socially accepted for females to express them, men and women should learn that there is not true freedom, but rather a code of conduct around them. Males often call on anger and rage, feelings that, it is argued, are incompatible with our feminine nature. As women, we are obliged to moderation in life and the expression of appropriate feelings (could it be because we live and express intensely with our feelings that we become uncontrollable?).
3. *Feelings are dangerous.* Many times in our culture and specifically in the family, we learn to identify a feeling with a determined behavior. Nonetheless, emotions and behavior are separate, and our thoughts mediate between them. Let's look at two examples:
 - “A woman battered by her husband, once brought in her 16-year-old daughter, Patricia, for an appointment with the aim of improving their relationship, particularly because the girl yelled at and insulted her constantly. On asking Patricia why she insulted her mother, she responded, “Because I get angry.” I answered that I could understand that she was angry with her mother, but why did she choose to yell at her when she got mad? She responded, “Because she is a fool, she deserves to be yelled at”.
 - “A couple from my neighborhood has an adolescent daughter who is starting her social life with other young people her age. One night she was invited to a party and one of her friends' mothers offered to bring her home at 10:00 that night. Nevertheless, she returned home around midnight and the mother said she was sorry, saying she had fallen asleep. The father, who had gone out to greet her, was very worried. He said thank you, but on entering the house yelled at and hit his daughter. The next day when he told me what had happened, he said he felt really furious seeing the woman so calm. Now, then, why did he beat his daughter? It is true that he was angry, but it was his thoughts that led him to take the action he took. He felt anger towards the woman, but he didn't touch her probably because his thoughts told him doing so would cause problems. Instead he chose his daughter as a target

because that action was justified in his cognitive schema. For example: he had the right to beat his daughter, and physical punishment was a convenient way of educating her and raising her correctly”.

Both examples clarify the power of thought in the shaping of behavior. In this way, if we want to change it, we should review and transform the cognitive map that justifies it.

Reflection

For the above examples, write a different ending, acknowledging the anger but with a transformation of the thoughts.

4. Painful feelings should be avoided. This is another important statement for how we evade our emotions. By denying and ignoring pain, we distance ourselves from the experiences that cause us pain and lose the opportunity to explore and direct our lives down a different path. Recognizing and living through suffering can be dangerous because we would be obligated to make substantial changes in our system of human relations. Denying the possibility of feeling pain and sadness can lead us towards the use of artificial painkillers, like drugs and alcohol. I have seen innumerable cases of well-intentioned people- but possibly mistaken- offering antidepressants to people who are facing the death of a loved one as a socially accepted strategy of avoiding suffering the loss. Don't try to look for suffering, but when it is inevitable, we should see it as a possibility for our new learning and growth.

To get in touch with our feelings, it is important to constantly look inside ourselves and validate whatever emotion we are experiencing in that moment, in the here and now. It is precisely dissociation, the denial of feelings that causes us to live in the past. Because insofar as we do not confront our own existence, we accumulate sadness, fear, anger, or shame. That which we wish to forget, manifests itself constantly through our physical and emotional reactions.

Pain

Our pain permits us to get to know and come to understand the complete meaning of being human.

Anne Wilson Schaefer

Sometimes we can recognize our feelings very well, but it is difficult to express them because, for example, we think that they are inappropriate and that we are going to be judged or punished. Also it could be that in the face of the intense emotions we have we fear we will lose control of ourselves or we fear the reaction of others. Most of the time, it is our inner dialogue that discredits nature and the

expression of feelings. This is responsible for our difficulty in freely communicating our emotions and the needs they release.

It is important to transform our emotions into words, or look for more appropriate phrases to express distinct states of mind.

A North American therapist proposed a very useful list of common words about feelings and their nuances. Some of them are:

Common Feeling Words

- **Unhappiness:** rejected, lifeless, sad, lost, empty, distressed, devastated, downcast, ashamed, despised, defeated
- **Affection:** love, friendship, caring, respect, trust, faith, intimacy closeness, camaraderie, tenderness, desire, admiration, attachment
- **Guilt:** ashamed, mortified, disgraced, remorse, disturbed,
- **Fear:** horror, apprehensive, doubt, hesitation, dismay, panic, fright, consternation, trembling, intimidated, vulnerable, insecure,
- **Rage:** resentment, irritation, indignation, anger, disgust, exasperation, bitterness, hate, offended, mad,
- **Confusion:** surprised, astonished, confused, perplexed, chaos, insecurity, indecision, ambivalence, sunk, frustrated, cheated,
- **Happiness:** content, happy, pleased, optimistic, hopeful, lively, jovial, satisfied, inspired, calm, genial, gratified, sensational, good, excellent,
- **Strength:** reliable, adequate, powerful, effective, important, capable, lucid, influential, competent, safe, potent,
- **Harm:** neglected, dejected, crushed, rejected, diminished, scolded, criticized, abandoned, devastated, humiliated, betrayed, injured, hurt, disappointed, abused, exploited

David Martin, 1992, p. 54-55

Reflection

Generally people adapt a pattern of behavior regarding the expression of our emotions. For the following feelings, write your usual reaction.

Feeling	Usual reaction
Sadness	_____
Anger	_____
Shame	_____
Guilt	_____
Powerlessness	_____
Jealousy	_____

Now think of a recent experience when you felt a strong emotion. It could be love, hate, guilt, or shame, or _____. Remember the situation, the people or person that were/was involved, the way you interpreted it, and how you communicated your feelings.

a. Situation:

b. Feelings (Describe with a variety of states of mind words)

c. Physical manifestations (How did your body express it?)

d. Inner dialogue (How did you interpret your feelings for the situation?)

e. Verbal communication (Could you express what you felt in words?)

f. If you kept what you felt inside, why didn't you express your feelings?

g. Do you think it would have been different if you had communicated your feelings?

h. Do you often choose not to express your feelings?

i. Write what you would have liked to say but didn't

j. In your workplace can you generally express your feelings freely? Is there organized support to do it? When you do it, what has been the usual response of your coworkers?

- k. Discuss with your coworkers a collective proposal to improve free communication of feelings and needs. It would include, for example:

In addition to the previous exercises for recognizing and expressing feelings it may also be useful to practice rituals or ceremonies; write letters or essays; or use an artistic medium like music, dance, or painting to relieve, express, and free an emotional state.

It is very difficult to work with violence and not accumulate feelings of anger, rage, or sadness. The emotions of those you help are so intense that you begin to live them as if they were your own. If you repress some of these emotions you are in danger of repressing your sensitivity as well.

It is recommended that you utilize all the possible strategies to learn to free the emotions that you carry after an exhausting day at work. Among these strategies are liberating rites. If they do not conflict with your belief system, you may follow those proposed by Ellen Bass, a therapist who works with female incest survivors. She developed them to release pain after facilitating “ I never told anyone” groups.

Letting Go of Pain Exercise

Immediately after the group I shower or take a bath. I feel the water washing and taking everything away. One by one, I think of every woman in the workshop, review what she did and said, what she still has to do, my feelings for her, my worries for her, and then I let her go to her continued healing, her own life. I let her go. This process is very fast, just long enough to imagine her in my mind, make contact, and release her.

If I find that I cannot let someone go easily, I analyze what is holding me back. Sometimes there is something I should learn, other times I need to assure myself she will be okay, that I cannot do more. From time to time, I realize I should tell her something more, and I make a mental note to do so.

Finally, I rinse myself with clean water, dry myself, put on clean clothes, brush my teeth, and I have finished. It is rare now when I cannot release my feelings through this cleansing ritual.

Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, 1995

Reflection Exercise: Knowing your own emotions

Quotation

**Self-awareness – recognizing a feeling while it occurs – is the key to emotional intelligence...
the ability to control feelings from one moment to another is fundamental for psychological**

Chapter Four: Transforming our way of thinking

To quiet our critical inner voice we should personalize it, protect ourselves from it, and then replace it. Although that voice earlier belonged to someone else, now it is ours and we can change it.

Sue Patton Thoele

As we have seen in the previous chapters, all human beings possess a particular way of interpreting our internal and external world, which results in inner dialogue. This is our guide for our behavior and facing problems, and develops from personal experience in a concrete society, community, and family. In this way, people who live in the same culture, with similar demands, privileges, and obligations regarding gender, age, ethnicity, and other similar conditions, share similar thoughts for interpreting experiences, problems, and solutions. Still, confrontation of the existing power structure occurs in a context that facilitates favorable divergence.

Those of us who are feminists, even without identifying ourselves as such, who work with the problem of violence, perceive that we have a different way of interpreting the world, particularly in relation to violence. Nevertheless, a combination of automatic and rigid thoughts that underlie our ideas can negatively affect our well-being and work. For example, rigid thought structures can contribute to the development of intolerance, the belief in the power of revenge, strict expectations about the conduct of men and women, the idea that our criticisms are always right, and irrational expectations for ourselves and others.

The first step in transforming distorted ideas is recognizing that they exist. To do that, connect yourself to your body and its emotions, as the presence of physical problems and disturbing feelings are important indicators of their existence. Also look for signals in your behaviors, as generally, they are results of exhaustion, the absence of harmony, or unsatisfying personal relations.

Using the typology proposed by cognitive theory as a base (McKay and others, 1988), we can review some of the most common processes of distorted thinking that can be linked to the demands of our work. It may also be important for you to see if the same things apply to other areas of your life.

Filtering: The process of thinking that chooses a particular vision with which to look at the world. This way of interpreting the world, also known as tunnel vision, is present when we generalize just one perspective to understand, qualify, and evaluate everything that happens to us in our personal relationships. Said in another way, we center our attention on only one point of view. For example, in working with violence, we are at risk of filtering all of our experiences and what happens around us through a lens of injustice, human vulnerability, and evil. That can leave us feeling constantly attacked in a senseless world, a feeling that could then activate the body's automatic response for threatening situations.

This happened to me in my first years of work, since I was so impacted by the painful stories and with the human ability to inflict pain. I constantly looked for explanations to make sense of it in my inner dialogue. My thoughts then focused on an interpretation of my world based on the idea that everything was a manifestation of violence against women. In losing the balance in my search, I also lost sight of what had been satisfactory and marvelous in my life, and in everything around me that was a concrete expression of solidarity, justice, love, and compassion.

I remember the day a friend who also worked with female incest survivors told me how bad she was feeling with herself and her loved ones, because in every form of touch between father and daughter she saw the possibility that they were happening in a context of sexual abuse. In sharing our experiences we could understand that we had become unbalanced, opened the doors to constant fear, and had lost enjoyment. Together we looked for ways to change this.

Looking for balance in our interpretations is an important task in our work and doing it collectively with others who also struggle against violence is a way to reach it.

Reflection

Specifically related to your work, remember phrases you have said or heard that include filtering. Look for collective alternatives to modify this type of distorted thinking.

Polarized thought: Occurs when our thinking persistently chooses to carry out dichotomous and extreme judgments. It consists of seeing people and situations in black and white, with no middle ground, where there is no room for errors or varying shades. In this way, we can interpret that humans are good or bad, marvelous or terrible. This can lead us to rigid positions for judging not only other people, but ourselves as well. Our errors become unforgivable and we judge the way we feel, think, and behave harshly and rigidly. Our psychic state may oscillate between guilt and self-approval.

Reflection

Specifically related to your work, remember phrases you have said or heard that include polarized thought. Look for collective alternatives to modify this type of distorted thinking.

Catastrophic vision: Consists of looking at the future in terms of disaster and catastrophe. It constitutes extreme negative thought. For example, if my stomach hurts I am sure I have cancer. If I don't do this report well I am a failure. If I do not go to work today the attention, service, or office will be a disaster. If today I wasn't attentive enough to my clients I am a bad therapist.

Reflection

Specifically related to your work, remember phrases you have said or heard that include catastrophic thought. Look for collective alternatives to this type of distorted thinking.

Personalization: Consists of the tendency to interpret what happens around us as a response to what we are, what we say, or what we do. It represents the belief that the actions or feelings of other people are a result of our behaviors, motivations, thoughts, and emotions. We lose sight of the individuality of those around us. It is present also when we continually compare ourselves with others, under the premise that our worth and way of working is questionable.

Reflection

Specifically related to your work, remember phrases you have said or heard that include personalized thought. Look for collective alternatives to this type of distorted thinking.

Fallacies of control: This constitutes distorted thoughts in regard to control and power. The first occurs when our inner dialogue tells us that we don't have control over our actions, that we are the result of others' desires, of God, of destiny. Under this premise, we lose the connection between our actions and their results, and as a consequence we may feel helpless in the face of external power. It is

true that some people have power and control over others, but this socially learned distortion contributes to the difficulty in looking for solutions and seeing our responsibility to do so. For example, we can blame the system, the organizational structure, or the directors as the cause of our poor salary, without perceiving our capability of having input into the changes.

The second fallacy is based in the belief of having omnipotent power. It presents itself when we feel responsible for everything that happens. At work it is the person who cannot delegate, who feels indispensable, and carries the responsibility for everyone and everything on their shoulders.

Reflection

Specifically related to your work, remember phrases you have said or heard that include fallacies of control. Look for collective alternatives to modify this type of distorted thinking.

Fallacy of change: It seems to me that this is the kind of distorted thought I have found most frequently in people who work with victims or perpetrators of violence. It is the sustained belief in the personal ability to change other people. Nevertheless, the only person we can change, with effort, is ourselves. Under this fallacy, the focus of our work is on asking for and sometimes demanding changes in behavior. From our perspective and our history we then blame ourselves or the other person if they do not follow our instructions or wishes. For example, in working with battered women, there are those who focus on the need for them to leave their abusers and then become frustrated when they return to the abuser, don't divorce them, or decide not to report the abuse. Sometimes, their own frustration causes them to denigrate the women, accusing them of being masochists.

An appropriate way of changing this type of thinking is to be conscious of the human freedom to make choices and change things. The other way is to develop empathy towards the people with whom we work, meaning putting ourselves in their place and their story and understanding their options and decisions.

Reflection

Specifically related to your work, remember phrases you have said or heard that include fallacies of change. Look for collective alternatives to modify this type of distorted thinking.

“Always being right”: This distortion refers to the process of continually proving that our ideas are correct, without room for doubt. Given the difficulty in listening and accepting other positions, this way of thinking makes us always on the defensive for our positions. It makes us assume an attitude of alert to any different thoughts and instead of understanding them as a learning opportunity, we interpret them as an attack on our belief systems. The continual defense of our ideas is tiring and many times brings about the opposite result of our intentions; to convince others that we are right. Attentive listening to others who differ from our point of view is a tool for fighting this distortion. The problem of violence is so complex and multidimensional that it requires the contribution of many sectors and points of view that contribute to finding existing alternatives for its eradication. In this way, not listening could prolong our search.

As an example, I remember a meeting not long ago with a colleague who works against violence against women and with whom I differ in opinion regarding what to do with the men who beat their partners. From my point of view there should be legal sanctions for such behavior, and she disagreed. The day we were going to see each other I felt overwhelmed with thoughts of finding ways to convince her. Nevertheless, I decided to change and instead of passionately defending my arguments, I made myself listen attentively to hers. Although we did not come to an agreement I could understand her points of view without labeling them. What was going to be a tense conversation lacking connection resulted in an enriched space for my own learning. After our dialogue I felt satisfied and with the desire for future meetings with the person with whom I had more agreements than differences.

Reflection

Specifically related to your work, remember phrases you have said or heard that include “always being right”. Look for collective alternatives to modify this type of distorted thinking.

“Shoulds”: This way of thinking is similar to the previous one, but “shoulds” refer specifically to the rules we think all other people should recognize and follow. We assume that they are always correct and indisputable. As a result, we act as judges of our own behavior and that of others. McKay and colleagues (1988) proposed a complete list of the most common and irrational “shoulds”:

“Shoulds”

- I should be generous, considerate, dignified, strong and altruistic.
- I should be a perfect lover, friend, parent, professor, student, and spouse.
- I should be able to deal with all hardships with fairness and serenity.
- I should be able to solve any problem quickly.
- I should never feel hurt, I should always be happy and calm.
- I should know, understand, and foresee everything.
- I should never feel certain emotions, like anger or jealousy.
- I should always be spontaneous and at the same time
- I should always control my feelings.
- I should never make a mistake.
- I should love my children equally.
- My emotions should be constant- I feel love sometimes and I should always feel it.
- I should totally trust myself.
- I should always be assertive, without ever hurting anyone.
- I should be extremely efficient.

Reflection

Specifically related to your work, remember phrases you have said or heard that include “shoulds”. Look for collective alternatives to modify this type of distorted thinking.

Once we recognize the ways of thinking that contribute to disagreeable emotional states it is important to transform them. For example:

- Tunnel vision can be controlled if we also concentrate on the opposing ideas that disturb us, so that when we see danger around us, we can concentrate also on those things or situations that give us security: look for balance.
- Dichotomized vision is gradually transformed with the voluntary practice of thoughts that involve middle ground or shades of gray.
- Catastrophic vision is transformed by thinking of the percentages of possibility for which disaster occurs.
- The fallacy of control is transformed by taking responsibility for our decisions and respecting the rights of others to live their own lives and solve problems with their own options.
- Listening to others actively and empathetically can combat “Always being right”.
- “Shoulds” can be transformed by adopting a more flexible value system.

In general terms we can say that a positive style of thinking (contrary to distorted ideas) helps us to feel better about ourselves and look for better ways to relate with others.

Some key strategies for positive thinking are:

- Flexibility
- Optimism
- Understanding or empathy
- Relativism in evaluating problems. They can also be a learning opportunity, for making sense out of life, or changing exhausting behavioral patterns.
- Taking responsibility for our decisions and actions.
- Thinking in the present.

Flexible thinking is a way to fight rigidity and obstinacy. Rigidity is the difficulty in changing preconceived ideas of what is correct. Flexibility does not mean, of course, constantly changing our principles or ideas, modifying them according to the needs of others, or giving up the passion with which we defend our ideals. Flexibility is being attentive to other possibilities. Sometimes, if we look at our own history we realize that in many ways our way of thinking has changed and what we used to defend as true in one phase of our life does not make sense in the present. It is important then to examine the inner and exterior world and evaluate or adjust our thoughts in the correct direction, meaning, testing if they are serving as a useful guide to carry us through the world. Flexibility allows us to connect ourselves and feel part of the world around us. When we have doubts we should remember that most of the time things are not just black or white.

Black and White

I see my life in marvelous Technicolor.
I liberate myself from useless and restrictive beliefs and attitudes.
I want to change and I can.

Sue Patton Thoele

Understanding the origin of our thoughts and where the ideas of others come from gives us a more flexible framework for interpreting our own and others' actions. It does not mean justifying unacceptable actions, but adopting a responsible and understanding position in our and others' decisions.

Responsibility

Faced with adverse circumstances, sometimes the only thing we can change is our mind. When we feel that something is out of our control, we can remember that, as the Reverend June Kelly says, "We are the only author of our thoughts", the "only thinker in our lives". We are responsible for our attitudes. Since our feelings are a direct result of our actions and thoughts, it is essential to be able to know how to modify our way of thinking.

Sue Patton Thoele

Constant intolerance many times puts us in a judging position, to decide what is correct or incorrect. On the contrary, tolerance and flexibility are qualities that help us toward the possibility of human interconnection, to feel like a responsible and conscious part of everything around us.

Your chosen style of thinking

determines the lens through which you interpret the world. If it is focused on the negative characteristics of human behavior, catastrophes, or natural disasters, it may be that your vision of the world, of others, and of yourself causes you to have a negative attitude toward the possibilities of change and human fulfillment. You may then lose faith in the meaning of your existence and also, given the aim of this book, may be pessimistic in terms of the impact of your work on your life and the life of others.

As we have seen, the ability to positively confront reality depends largely on the way in which we evaluate problems and the meaning we give them. Changing the reality of that which can be changed and not trying to control what happens outside of ourselves generates a profound satisfaction that can allow us to develop an optimistic attitude toward life.

Pessimism is a learned interpretive style and is habitually linked to the belief in failure. Optimism allows us to see our achieved goals, motivate ourselves to finish tasks still undone, and have faith in our abilities to contribute to the solution of important problems.

In this sense, the opinion that you are deserving is also an important aspect in guiding your behavior. Developing self-esteem, confidence in your abilities, quieting your critical inner voices, pardoning and accepting your mistakes, and replacing blame with responsibility are factors that will help you to develop an optimistic view of your personal worth.

Besides recognizing and fighting the ways of thinking that contribute to bad feelings, disconnection, and loss of faith, another way of achieving positive thinking is the use of “self affirmations”. They are expressions of health and well-being transmitted through thoughts to positively guide behavior. In ancient cultures they have been used to influence inner dialogue and achieve emotional and physical healing. They are highly appreciated by those who look for alternative ways of healing.

When I recovered my self-esteem my quality of life improved,
When I forgave myself I stopped blaming others.

Facundo Cabral

Affirmations are concrete phrases directed toward inner well-being with the goal of becoming automatic thoughts by their size, strength, and repetition. With them we try to replace the negative ideas about ourselves and our relations with others. Interpreting the world in a more positive way can reactivate, at least, new sensations.

Examples of affirmations:

- I deserve all the good in life.
- I forgive my imperfections.
- I am strong and able, although sometimes I am afraid.
- I am a person deserving of respect.
- I feel good about myself.
- I like myself.
- I like to live in the present.
- My body is mine, it belongs to me and I take care of it.

The work with affirmations begins when we define our needs in a concrete way and then construct a thought (command) that helps to satisfy them. Part of the process consists of putting in writing that command and evaluating what we feel upon reading and saying it. Once it is understood, we repeat it in the morning, at night when we go to bed, or when we want to substitute a negative thought at any time of the day. You may write them on notes that you put on the refrigerator, bedside table, notebook, and day planner. The object of the repetition is to aim the thought toward a determined direction.

Affirmations may be accompanied by visualizations, meaning, while we repeat a phrase we can imagine its result in our body. For example, “I am a field of energy”, can be repeated while we imagine a torrent of energy that penetrates the body and circulates through the veins, capillaries, and major arteries until it fills the entire body.

Louise Taylor, a North American author who is a specialist in self-healing, proposes among the essential strategies for well-being, affirmations and visualizations. For example, for cases of insomnia, she recommends:

Affirmations and images to fight insomnia

Affirmations:

- I say good-bye to the day and am thankful for the experiences that it has given me.
- The morning will offer me a new beginning.
- My spirit relaxes and rests.
- I trust my life to a higher power.
- I have the conviction that my life will take charge of me.
- I have transmitted this day to a perfect power.
- I sleep in perfect peace.

Images:

- Close your eyes.
- Imagine that you are floating peacefully and that you have an intense feeling of sleepiness.
- Inhale a nice, blue breath, full of energy, that will relax you completely.
- Move all your worries to another cloud and let them go away from you.
- Repeat the visualization every night at bedtime.

Louise Taylor, p. 180-181

Reflection

Regarding your physical and emotional needs, make a list of affirmations to substitute for automatic negative thoughts or to contribute to your well-being. Remember to write them in the first person, make them concrete, and strong.

Complete the following phrases for yourself:

- Today I will be tolerant with _____
- Today I forgive _____
- Today I will think more about my _____
- I will balance my opinion about _____
- I am _____
- I feel flooded with _____
- My body is full of _____
- There is harmony in my _____
- Today I will lavish myself with _____
- All my feelings are _____
- I accept myself with _____
- There is peace in my _____
- I deserve to be _____
- Today I will do _____ for my physical well-being
- Today I will do _____ for my emotional well-being

My own affirmations

Reflection exercise: The power of thought

Quotation

The last of the human liberties is to choose our own attitude in any circumstance.

Victor Frankl

Personal comments about the quote

Observations for Chapter Four

Chapter Five: Reviewing what we do every day

A caress is a love poem. It may be timid and short, or grandiloquent and expressive. It may be just one word or a long discourse, but it should always be from the heart, hopeful, and sincere.

Claude Steiner

In this chapter we will review some behavior guidelines that can help us achieve personal well-being.

Many of our behaviors are the direct result of our feelings and automatic thoughts. We are not conscious of choosing this or that behavior. In this sense, it is important to examine ourselves with the aim of making ourselves responsible for our decisions and behavior, which means being conscious of our daily choices and the results they can produce.

Every adult has an enormous repertoire of behaviors that we use every day. Depending on our history, how we interpret it, the idea of who we are and who are those around us, we will develop specific behaviors to communicate our needs or satisfy those of others. Habitual responses to determined circumstances are what we call behavioral patterns.

These patterns can be grouped in many ways and there are a great many psychological and sociological theories for studying, changing, or reinforcing them. We will not talk about all the theoretical positions, but rather use some of their principles to help us know ourselves better and make more healthy and productive connections.

The first step in recognizing the way in which we behave is to explore those behavioral patterns with which we habitually respond to determined internal and external demands. For example, regarding the feeling of anger, we can choose to act aggressively, isolate ourselves, or communicate sincerely about our feelings. We may also look at how we relate to our close friends, if we are people who always please, tolerate, sacrifice, or demand, among a variety of possible behaviors. And after we have acted, how do we feel about the consequences of our actions? Meaning, do we hold ourselves responsible for our actions or do we tend to blame ourselves or others for our own decisions?

Let's use the principle "Every human being deserves to be respected" as an example and look at the range of behaviors that can result from it. If this thought guides our behavior, have we chosen to surround ourselves with people who accept and respect us? How do we ask for respect? How do we express our discontent when we have been disrespected? Can we respect different views or people whose beliefs are different from ours? What does my body say and express about self-respect and the respect of others?

The way we answer these questions can help us identify if our behavior is similar for other principles as well. Meaning, our usual ways of asking, expressing, demanding, and authorizing satisfaction tell about our behavioral patterns. In these ways are found word choice, tone of voice, and body language.

These patterns adjust themselves to determined beliefs that are justified for certain circumstances, a way of responding. For example, we will analyze a possible justification for “yelling”.

1. **Personal Premise #1:** Yelling is a behavior that gets results. For example: “By yelling others pay attention to me, learn to fear me, know that I don’t give up, respect my orders, submit to me...”
2. **Personal Premise #2:** “Anger is an excuse to yell”. Yelling is an excusable behavior in certain circumstances.
3. **Personal Premise #3:** I will yell if I am angry if I want to obtain positive results. For example: In premise #1, it is justified to yell at my children, my partner, and my subordinates.
4. **Personal Premise #4:** If I get results from #1, I can yell habitually and almost automatically in similar circumstances.

In most occasions once premise #4 is obtained people can forget the original justification, and from the force of repetition can identify with their own behavior pattern or style: “I am this way, I have always been this way, it is a part of my nature”. At the most, they can use the most immediate motivation to act in a certain way.

Just as we looked at automatic thoughts, it is important to also look at habitual behavior, that which is repeated with time and that today we consider an intrinsic part of our personality.

There are healthy patterns that contribute to our well-being and that of those around us, but there are also habitual ways of acting that are self-destructive or harmful to others. For example, we have two large groups of behaviors related to personal unhealthiness:

1. **Self-destructive habits:** Often eating foods that are bad for us, using alcohol or drugs to the point of getting sick or losing control over our decisions, inappropriate body positions, and inadequate nutrition, among others.
2. **Debilitating patterns in interpersonal relations:** Consist of habitually being with people who do not satisfy our needs or do us harm. Debilitating patterns come from our childhood learning or our adult life, meaning they are socially learned behaviors in our personal lives. As they are learned, they can be unlearned.

These patterns include the ways in which we habitually respond to our feelings of anger, powerlessness, gratitude, our ways of expressing our needs for affection, touch, and respect, among many other ways of behaving with others.

Ideas around family, partnership, motherhood or fatherhood, work relations, the meaning of positions of power or subordination also effect our patterns of behavior.

Examples of phrases that contain behavior patterns:

- When I have a partner, I give all of myself, my feelings, my money, my house, and generally, afterwards I think they took advantage of me and I feel resentful.
- I never go to work parties because I don't like to mix the two areas.
- When I have a date I usually end up having sex.
- I never drink alcohol at meetings with people I work with.
- Generally, when I am mad at my partner, instead of talking about the issue I refuse to have sex.
- Dinnertime is important to me. I always try to be at home for it so I can talk with my children about their days.
- When I am angry with someone I will not say a word to them.
- My house is like a hotel. I am always putting someone up, I am a person who always finds people needing help.

When we act in such a way that we later feel unhappy or upset, it is important to change our behavior for actions that offer us the opportunity to feel better. One of the key aspects in transforming a behavior is being conscious of it and holding ourselves responsible for its results.

Steps for analyzing a behavioral pattern:

- a. Identify the behavior pattern.
- b. Identify the feelings present before the action.
- c. Identify the thoughts that justify the behavior.
- d. Analyze the decision process: choosing to act in that way was conscious (the consequences were foreseen) or automatic.
- e. Analyze the consequences on you and their effect on others.

Reflection

In your repertoire of behaviors, look for an example of a behavioral pattern that produces well-being and satisfaction, and another that produces the opposite, that makes you feel unsatisfied, guilty, or any other negative feeling. Then analyze the justifications for both behaviors, the decision process (conscious or automatic), the before and after feelings, and the consequences of your actions. Reflect on the result of your comparison.

Changing a negative behavior pattern can come about by being conscious of two principles: the importance of living in the present moment, and the responsibility of assuming the consequences of our decisions and actions.

Deepak Chopra, an author we have already quoted in the chapter on taking care of our bodies, has written a book that has great meaning in the positive changes I have made in my life. He uses eastern and western philosophy to promote a combination of transforming concepts to live in harmony with ourselves, nature, and other people. One of these precisely refers to the need of being conscious in the present moment to make decisions that positively guide our actions. For this, he argues the need to commit to the following tasks:

1. Today I will witness all the decisions I make each moment. Upon witnessing these decisions I will bring them to my conscience. I will know that the best way to prepare for any moment in the future is to be totally conscious now.
2. Always when I make a decision I will ask myself two things: “What are the consequences of the decision I am making?”, and also “Will this decision bring happiness and satisfaction to myself and those who will be affected by it?”
3. I will ask my heart to guide me and I will let myself be guided by its positive or negative messages. If I feel comfortable with my decision I will do it. If my decision makes me feel bad I will stop and look at the consequences with my inner vision. This guide permits me to make spontaneous decisions correctly for myself and those around me.

Deepak Chopra, 1995, p. 46

There are many things over which we have no control, nor the power to change them. But every adult person is responsible for the way we choose to respond to situations. Responsibility is the ability to **learn to choose consciously**. This is one of the most proclaimed requirements for positively constructing our life project, since it gives us the inner strength necessary to make concrete changes. Assuming the responsibility for our decisions, we are in control of changing ourselves, and at least, not waiting for exterior changes to make us happy.

The importance of inner change can be illustrated by some words that were written close to one thousand years ago on the tomb of an Anglican bishop, in Westminster Abbey.

The majority of people have experiences in their personal history marked by pain. These scars can effect the present. For example, those who suffered humiliations, abuse, and injustice in their childhood did not choose pain, but upon growing up, can make the decision to heal those old wounds, by choosing how they will live and heal.

When I was young and free, and my imagination had no limits, I dreamt of changing the world. As I grew and became more wise, I discovered that the world would not change, and I lowered my hopes and decided to change only my country. But that also seemed irremovable. When I came to the sunset of my life, in a desperate last attempt, I resigned myself to changing my family and those closest, but shame, they did not want to know anything. And now, lying on my death bed, I have suddenly realized ; If only I had changed myself, then by example my family could have changed.

Through their inspiration and support, I could have done something more for my country and even could have changed the world.

Change

With every change you risk a crisis. By beginning to change your responses, undoubtedly it will displease some people in your life. People resist change and are used to you the way you are. The Chinese character for crisis is a combination between danger and opportunity. Risking change endangers the status quo, but opens a new opportunity for freedom for ourselves, our families, and our friends. Risk may frighten us, but it brings with it many rewards.

Sue Patton Thoele, 1996, p. 198

To live in the moment means being in synch with what happens inside and around us, of the small miracles that happen minute by minute in our minds, bodies, and nature. A nun once said that depression could only be explained as a lack of concentration on the present, or living the sadness of the past or the anxiety of the future.

Reflection

What does the living in the present moment mean to you?

Upon being conscious of the present and your responsibility to choose how you will react to situations, you have the opportunity to change those behaviors that do not bring well-being to your life. Included in those behaviors are also those related to other people, your family, people who come to you for help, people you work with daily, and whomever you meet on your way.

To change oneself, one only needs courage. That is to say, the desire to act and do it, despite fear.

To finish this chapter, I invite you to reflect on the behaviors you use to **express and live** the following principles, which generally guide the work against violence. You may add others and put them in order of importance according to your philosophy.

- Solidarity
- Teamwork
- Tolerance
- Love
- Equality
- Empathy
- Respect
- Abundance

- Flexibility
- Passion

Reflection Exercise: How do we change?

Quotation

**In the infinity of the life I find myself in all is perfect, full, and complete.
Change is the natural law of my life.
I accept it with my blessing.
I am open to change.
I opt to change my mode of thinking.
I opt to change the words I use.
I change the old or the new with ease and cheer.
It is easier to forgive than I had thought.
Forgiving makes me feel free and light.
With happiness I learn to love myself more and more.
The more resentments I let go of, the more love I can express.
I feel good changing my ideas.
I am learning to choose to make today a pleasant experience.
All is good in my life.**

Louise Hay

Personal comment about the quote

Observations of Chapter Five

Conclusions

Throughout this book we have dealt with a series of recommendations for learning to take care of ourselves. They imply a personal commitment to accept the challenge of feeling good, for ourselves and for the type of work we do. It is important to follow or undertake the way with faith, courage, and the help of others. It is important that you pay attention to your experience, as you know yourself better than anyone. Your own knowledge will help you change, transform, and incorporate all that makes you feel good about yourself and others. And to share it.

Although this book has particularly focused on personal work, it is important to be conscious of being part of the universe, of the same energy that gives life to those who share with us, time, history, your country, your home, and work. All humans are interconnected and survive thanks to the support of each other.

It is true, that to passionately pursue the utopia of constructing a different world requires a process of self-care. This is feasible if we are conscious that personal and social changes are only possible when we construct them under the principle of solidarity.

**If I do mine and you do yours and we don't meet each other's expectations, we can survive,
but the world will not.
You are you and I am I, and together, holding hands, not casually, we can each find the beauty
in the other.
If not, no one will be able to help us.**

Claude Steiner

Part Three

Some friends reflect on their self-care

My self-care activities

Rebeca Alvarado*

As part of my daily routine I have incorporated a series of rituals and activities that help channel and contain the accumulation of painful experiences with which I work every day.

My work with violence began about five years ago and today I can say I have been consistent with my self-care, although I think I should incorporate more. I do the following activities:

- Physical exercise: I walk and jog five times a week. This is the first thing I do in the day. It releases accumulated tension from work and also strengthens my body.
- Weekly I grant myself a therapeutic space, not with the aim of supervising clinical work, but rather as a moment to think about myself, to develop my self-esteem and clarify personal goals and wishes. In this space I also work on those areas of myself that influence my well-being.
- Space for enjoyment: One day a week I enjoy time with people I am close to, with walks, food, meeting friends or family. This helps me get out of my usual environment and away from the problem of violence.
- Sense of humor and positive mentality.
- Solidarity in the workplace: I try to form a work environment of solidarity and teamwork; my work team is a network of support, fundamental to making decisions together. We share fun moments and we give each other, once a month, space for catharsis about our daily work.
- In this moment I am excited to join a meditation, dance, or art group.

Reflection

Pablo Gonzalez*

How do I work as a psychologist, having to daily indirectly witness violence, pain, and people's confusion?

* Psychologist: Works with individual and groups of children and adolescents who have experienced some form of abuse in their families, such as incest or physical abuse, particularly those who have been institutionalized.

* Forensic psychologist: A pioneer in Costa Rica specializing in working with incarcerated male perpetrators of sexual and domestic violence, with broad training and experience in counseling juvenile and adult sexual offenders.

How can I do something being as sensitive as crystal to feel and make contact, trying to understand and at the same time stay as strong as steel, so that the traumatic and maladaptive experiences of the majority of these people, don't end up harming my conceptual system, my feelings and basic positive assumptions about: who I am, who we are, and what the world I live in is like?

I have found practical answers to these questions. The first step, which I consider simple but which makes a difference, is to be conscious that this emotional work is high risk and to accept that I should be doing things to be well and feel good. Furthermore, I convince myself that no change in myself will be possible if I don't take it on as a personal task that will require constant effort and consistency.

Being conscious has led me to try, among other things, three groups of activities that seem to me to be of equal importance and that help me stay well and feel good:

- I try to find meaning in what I do and also intellectualize, systematize, and share with others what we can learn from abusers and victims. I attempt to maintain an attitude of discovery, trying to not limit myself to strict perceptions, beliefs, and theoretical constructs that can restrict my knowledge. This practice has allowed me to learn a great deal about kinds of violent and abusive behavior; question, restate, and motivate myself to produce practical knowledge that helps improve the way in which I do my job; and contribute to the construction of a more objective justice and the well-being of others, insofar as I am able to contribute to the development of preventative actions. As Gandhi said: **“There is no science without humanity”**.
- Another group of actions has to do with the fact that I am convinced that I cannot do this work without having contact with myself, accepting and integrating in the healthiest way possible and many times with the help of other colleagues and loved ones, my own shadow or dark part, my needs, my losses, and traumatic experiences. This is directly related to resisting the strong temptation to rescue or save my clients myself. I have to be strong to be an indirect witness to the tragedy or maladjustment of these people without losing my humanistic vision, finding wherever possible the ethical objectivity and tenderness to tell the truth that I have to tell.
- The last, and as I noted not any less important nor unconnected to the previous ones, is related to my personal well-being and my private life. This is about cultivating my relationship with God, doing thirty minutes of exercise a day, respecting my rest time, improving my nutrition, sometimes engaging in a sport (more for recreation than competition), and defending my labor rights. I also take care of my relationship, as I share with her my plans, and she is the source of my best feelings: solidarity, kindness, cooperation, commitment, and the desire to always keep alive the magic of the love we share... It is also very important to me to care for my relationships with my children and close family, as they all give meaning to my existence. I seek their company in recreational activities, moments of relaxation, and many others, like: celebrating birthdays, trips, going to the movies, attending church, planting plants, cooking, painting the house, playing... It is about being present in the important moments in their lives and having them present in mine, giving a lot of hugs and caresses, making sure to respect needs and tolerate defects. More than controlling and sanctioning,

to care and be cared for... Keeping a positive and constructive attitude towards hardships in life; worrying more about the real than the imaginary; trying to avoid friendship with negative and pessimistic people; and always pushing myself toward short, medium, and long term projects and goals...

I finish with a thought by Silvio Rodriguez:

*I invite you to believe me when I say the future...
Has twenty thousand new seeds in the Valley of yesterday...*

I am doing very well

Sally Perez*

I have always thought that caring for the body's signals is to know ourselves and this allows us to always be in prevention. I believe I know how my body reacts when I am worried, upset, and stressed, and thanks to that I can keep myself as calm as possible, establishing self control of my emotions and physical reactions, according to the situation in which I find myself. When I recognize that my muscles have tensed, there is a pain in some part of my body, the temperature has lowered in my hands, my mouth is dry, my hands are sweating, it is because I have lost control, I could not prevent something. Then I have to try to regulate these manifestations so they return to their normal state.

How do I do this?

First I recognize which aspects of the situation I am in or am going to encounter make me uncomfortable, upset, and that could be unleashing the natural responses to stress. Then I evaluate them and try to identify objectively their impact. Immediately after, I begin diaphragm breathing that keeps me in control so that I can try to generalize this state, directing it to the place in my body where the signs of stress have shown themselves, establishing calming responses, relaxation, lightness, and warmth, and being confident I can do it. When I perceive that I am succeeding or I have produced a change no matter how small, I say to myself, "**I am doing very well**". This gives me, in this moment, the confidence to succeed.

When the stressful situation lasts a long time and I can't identify the solution to the problem, I need to talk or write about it so I can distance myself from the event and look at it from a different perspective. I try to express it in detail, consider my physical reactions equal to my emotions, and use as many positive phrases as negative ones. This allows me to change my global perception of the situation. I do a relaxation exercise at the end of this dialogue.

* A Mexican psychologist specializing in stress management. She is also very well recognized for her work with alternative healing techniques, such as Shiatsu massage and aromatherapy.

By caring for my health I try to be whole. I try to have a balanced diet, I exercise and walk, I sleep well, smile, look for a physically and socially agreeable environment, try to keep my sense of humor, strengthen my friendships, and recognize that I am a positive person. All this helps me manage daily stress more easily.

I also like to dance, admire nature, play with children, and try to enjoy every minute of my life. In this way I believe I am happy and can share this happiness with others.

My self-care process

Teresita Ramellini C.*

Working with people who have lived through violent situations means I hear stories of pain and suffering, stories of betrayal and powerlessness. It means I place myself on par with the person and walk with her through her story to have the chance to support her process of recovering from the results of violence in her life and her process of constructing a life without violence.

This type of accompaniment necessarily involves me completely in the process and makes my spaces for self-care indispensable. Without them my work instrument (which is me) would not be able to survive or be efficient and useful. Involving yourself completely in the recovery process of people who have suffered violence makes it necessary to have self-care space that is also complete. How do I be sensitive to the situation without flooding myself with that person's pain? How do I take an approach from the psychological discipline without technique completely blocking my feelings?

It has been useful to me to pay attention to both aspects: the intellectual and the personal. In the personal aspect I have felt it necessary to take care of the emotional as well as the physical. In this area, my attempts at self-care have been directed at paying attention to both aspects. I am still learning.

In terms of the intellectual, I study and keep myself informed of the advances in research, and try to discuss and exchange opinions with other therapists. This has been the way I have been most easily able to recognize the need for self-care, because it is what most strengthens us professionally.

In the personal area, my first challenge was to recognize how much and how what people told me affected me. This is because those who work in psychology assume they have been trained to dissociate professionally and it is then difficult to see that others' pain affects us. I think the first step in my self-care process was accepting that that pain did impact me.

My self-care in the personal aspect includes things so dissimilar that they range from playing with my cats to going out to dinner; from leaving a space in my schedule to go for a massage to taking care of

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- An activist in the struggle against violence against women, and a therapist specializing in working with women who have experienced some form of sexual exploitation: incest, rape, childhood sexual abuse, or harassment. She also participates in developing regional and national plans to eradicate domestic violence.

my plants; from reading my favorite poems to wanting to learn to play the piano; from lighting candles and incense to seeing a movie. I think the actual activities are not as important as creating a space to do them.

Understanding that part of the transformation of reality in general begins with the transformation of each person specifically. I feel the work I can do to support someone is as important as what I can do to care for myself.

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