



Wednesday Workshop: Supporting Survivors of Sexual and Domestic Violence

Podcast Transcript

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Re-engaging with Support Systems

Presented by Marissa, Adult Domestic Violence Advocate, and
Teresa, Dual Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Counselor

Marissa: Hello and welcome to The Women's Center's Wednesday Workshop podcast intended for survivors of domestic and sexual violence as a time to learn and grow in order to move beyond their trauma. Each session will feature instruction on a healing topic. This week our topic is Re-engaging with Support Systems.

We are your hosts, my name is Marissa and I'm the Adult Domestic Violence Advocate with The Women's Center.

Teresa: And I'm Teresa, I'm the Dual Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Counselor at The Women's Center. We are talking about re-engaging with our support networks this week. This is a really big topic for every single survivor. In order to better understand how to re-engage with these different networks, our community or ourselves, you have to understand how we might have become disconnected from them in the first place. We also have to understand what the abuse or the trauma that we endured or are currently enduring, can do to our support systems and to work to destigmatize it so we can start that healing process.

So how does this happen? Abusers work to create a barrier between you, the people or the things that you love, and that gives you that sense of independence and autonomy that makes you, you. We know that isolation is a really common power and control tactic that abusers will utilize in order to gain and maintain that power and control over their partner. And partners will do this by utilizing isolation to cut off access to support systems so that you feel dependent on that abuser, so you feel like you can't go talk to that friend or that family member, that all you have left is that abuser in your social support system.

This is a gradual process, this doesn't happen overnight, where we are with that partner and then all the sudden, we don't have that support network the next day. It might be like walking up a hill. It's very slow at first, it's a steep hill and you can't see the top when you are walking up from the bottom. Until you get to the top, you might be able to look down and say "Oh my gosh, how did I get up here? Where is everyone? How did that happen?" It's going to take some time. We said it before, healing, it's going to take time.

So being able to recognize the different ways that abuse has impacted our support system might take a little bit too. Your partner might have asked or demanded that you would not be around or communicate or visit with people or places that were once important to you. This could look like your friends that you had prior to that relationship, family systems that you engaged with, or even different events that you might have gone to every year or every month. Was there a book club that you went to on Sunday afternoon and they're saying that's not a good thing for you to engage with? This is going to look different for everyone, but just know that isolation is a really common tactic that partners will use to make us feel like we can't engage with those support networks.

Marissa: What are some things that you might hear when an abuser is isolating you? Again, these warning signs may start more subtle, and then he may turn into more overt, direct threats as time goes on again, with that hill analogy that Teresa had laid out. Some things you might hear are, "Your friend is so dumb I don't know why you hang out with them. I don't want you to be like them. If you keep hanging out with them we're over." And these verbal threats are only one piece of the puzzle here for this tactic.

Isolation can also involve nonverbal language, physically distancing themselves from you, refusing to be in the same space, or on the other hand being a little bit more clingy to sort of act as a barrier between you and others. If you're out with friends and family, your abuser may call or text you constantly, show up to check in, or insist that you check in by calling at a certain time, by returning home at a certain time, or they may also insist to pick you up early too. There are so many ways that abusers can display this isolation.

Teresa: To continue on that conversation, we know that guilt and blame are two very common emotions to experience when we are with an abuser in that abusive relationship. Specifically experiencing isolation too, that's going to be something that a lot of people might experience. We know abusers will try to pick a fight with us and maybe even use the silent treatment to "punish you" for spending time away from them. This might look like utilizing words of blame to make you feel guilty for spending time with friends or family. Going outside of that house or that apartment, or you know

spending time without that partner, doing what you enjoy. Abusers might do that to inhibit you from doing that in the future. An example that might look like an abuser saying “You were out there having so much fun, I had no one to talk to tonight. I'm lonely. Why couldn't you just stay home with me?” This is going to look different for everyone, but really just trying to drive home the point that blame or that guilt might be something that abuser instills in you in order to maintain control.

Abusers may also have this us versus the world mentality. That's where an abuser will insist that they're the only person that truly loves you, that truly cares about you and supports you. And that anyone that disagrees with them is the enemy. An example of this may look like an abuser saying to you “Why do your parents hate me? They don't want us to be together. I don't want you to be around them anymore. I don't want us to go over there anymore.” This is difficult because like that hill, is not going to happen overnight, it might be very subtle, covert tactics that are utilized. We might internalize that guilt and that blame, and not even recognize that we are slowly becoming more and more isolated not just from ourselves, but also from other people in our life.

Marissa: Ultimately, the abuser wants to be the only member of your support system, and a very unhealthy support system at that. That said, it's important to go over what a support system actually is and what a healthy support system looks like. A support system is a group of people or network if you will, who survivors can rely on to provide support when you're in need. They can help lift you up when you're struggling, they can provide a shoulder to cry on, you can laugh with them, or they can be that listening ear too when you need it. This will look different for everyone, but this can be friends, family, advocates, maybe a counselor or therapist. This could look like hotlines too, or members of your neighborhood.

Teresa: Why is this important to talk about? Why are we taking the time to talk about what is a support system, how do we get dis-engaged with it, why do we need people? As human beings we are social. And that's what makes us humans. We want to have that sense of belonging in this world and that connection with others. Our support systems during that abusive relationship right after that abusive relationship is completely vital to help us rebuild again.

While we're in that abusive relationship, reconnecting with a support system or talking to a support system, this is going to look different for everyone, but could look like safety planning with someone. Or having you know that person to check in with you every day at noon or you have that person you've established a code word with. It's important not just from that safety aspect, but for you to be able to feel like you can talk through things that you're experiencing while you're still in that relationship. After an abusive relationship, support systems are just as important because it's going to allow you to

further process what it is that you've gone through. Whether that is with an advocate or a counselor or therapist, or through a hotline, really they're going to be that sounding board for you and to have you have that opportunity to check in and make sure that you're doing okay even after you left.

We know that abusers want partners or victims to feel as low as possible to continue to feel as isolated as possible. But, our support systems can help us renew that sense of well-being in ourselves, revisit healthy coping skills that we might have had in the past, and check in on ourselves, which I think is really important. We might not have recognized that we'd have been really quiet, really checked out, but maybe that friends will be able to say “Hey, I haven't heard from you in a couple days, what's going on?” And we can kind of tune in and see what we got to do to either take care of ourselves or communicate in a different way.

Marissa: And to that point, re-engaging with our support systems is immensely important to healing. Our support systems can help survivors break out of that role of feeling isolated that their abusers have created. Reconnecting with supports will give survivors strength, but also take away their abuser's power. This is why that isolation was so strong, they did not want to give up their power. But it is so much more important that you reclaim your space, your voice and your strength that has always been there. We talked about this quite a bit in our previous podcast Reclaiming Your Space. If you haven't taught that one yet and you want to know more about how to start the process of reclaiming some of these things that's essentially always been there, I would definitely recommend checking out that podcast.

Teresa: Support systems are obviously going to look different for everyone just based on who's around us or where we're in the process. But, one example of this is going to be in your environment at home. That might be the family that you have grown up with or that you have chosen to surround yourself with. They might be that good resource, because they might know you best. They might have been around you the most too, prior to that relationship and are better able to see the difference between who you were before you met that abusers, versus where you're at now.

So, consider some of these steps when approaching family, or even trying to reconnect to re-engage with them. Having conversations with family about abuse or trauma might be difficult and especially while we're still in that relationship. We're just going to walk through some points of different domains in your life where you can have these conversations. When engaging with your family, it's important to first identify different family members that you can trust. This is really crucial because if you can't trust that information that you're talking about is going to stay safe and confidential it's going to be really difficult to feel like you can be open with them. So, ask yourself, who in your

family is that good listener? Or whose super supportive regardless of their opinions, or the way that they interact with the world? Who makes you feel supported and cared for?

So, after you've identified different family members that you can trust, it's important to ask yourself, am I ready to share this information with them? You can pick a family member, and not be ready to talk about it yet. Just because you've identified someone that's safe, that you feel is going to respect you and hear you, you might not be in that space in your healing where you're ready to discuss what you've gone through and that's okay.

Maybe a safe way to do this is to bring up a related topic with them. Whether that is through an article, or something that you saw in the news, gauge the waters, see how they respond, so that you'll feel more comfortable engaging with them about your own personal experience when you feel like it's the right time. The third point too, when thinking about talking to family members, is to acknowledge that bringing up the topic can be hard. No matter how you approach it, you're doing hard, important things by speaking out and speaking up. And that's going to look different for every single survivor.

I know we've talked about this on other podcasts, but we might not be in that space we're ready to share the trauma that we've experienced. And maybe this is something that is going to take months, and that's okay. But, just knowing that by even about speaking out, you're making progress in itself. Boundaries are also huge when you're talking to any support system, but especially when we're talking about family, because they are and can be some of the closest people in our lives. They might have known us from a young age, or they might have been with us for years at this point, so it's important to ask yourself what role do you want your family members to play? Do you want advice from them? Do you want them to listen? Do you want them to check in on you? Take some time prior to having that conversation where you're sharing what it is that you've been through, and ask yourself those different questions to better identify what your boundaries are so that you can know what to expect from them and know what to ask for.

And lastly, it's important to be prepared for that reaction. We can't control other people's responses and reactions, that is really difficult because we might want to be prepared for a certain response or a certain statement that they're going to make. We ultimately don't know what that's going to look like. We know that family members might react strongly because they care about you. They might be scared for you or upset at what you had to endure. Their reactions might come from a place of sadness and their reactions might come from a place of anger, or hurt, or fear, and that's okay. It's just important to understand that you have very little control over the way that they react

and respond. That's why it's important you to think about having something in place afterwards so that you can take care of yourself, just in case that response was something that you weren't anticipating. And ultimately, come back to the point that they might not understand what it is that you've been through, and they might not get why abusers abuse, or why you have become isolated from that family system. Know that this isn't about you or what you have survived through.

Marissa: And again, I want to reiterate that family is one piece of this puzzle of your support system. With that, I want to talk a little bit about what support systems might look like at both work and school and how you may be able to re-engage with those folks. Starting with work, one of the first things you can do is try to talk to a co-worker or supervisor. You can let them know what your abuser looks like, like the car they drive, what their name is if you feel uncomfortable doing so. This can ultimately help you feel more secure at work.

And some extra steps you can take too, if you like, is leaving a picture with whoever your security team is at work, a copy of any restraining orders that you might have. You can also ask to be walked in and out of buildings. I want to say right here that you know you're not burdensome for asking for those things. You deserve to feel safe at work, and these measures will help ensure that. They're all part of your safety plan too. Some other things you can think about with work is, what happens if your abuser shows up? If they call? Is there any sort of code where you want to establish with that co-worker, or supervisor that lets you know that your abuser has contacted somebody, or they've shown up? Is there any room that you can go to, anything that you can do to ensure that you feel not only physically safe but as well as emotionally safe? A lot of these can carry over to school as well.

Abuse and the effects of abuse can impact and disrupt learning. With that, consider talking to any teachers or professors that you feel comfortable or safe with. Maybe even a counselor or therapist on campus, let them know what's going on, how it's impacting you, and maybe some goals that you have to continue school and what ways you feel you could use support in that endeavor. That said, any of those professionals may be mandated reporters. If you have any questions on that please talk to an advocate and we can walk through what that process specifically looks like.

Teresa: Another support system to think about is the one that you have with your friends. Your friends might know you well, they might know you just as well as your co-workers or different students that you engage with on campus, or your family members too. They might have seen changes in you since the beginning of that relationship, and might have felt you either isolating for fear of what would happen if you go out with them, or if you hang out with them, or they might have seen you isolate yourself as well.

It's important to ask yourself what you want support to look like from then moving forward? Do you want them to just be there, and to be available to talk if you need it? Do you need them to just listen to you about what it is that you're going through? If you're still in that relationship, do you just need someone to safety plan with you? Or to utilize that code word? Or do you need advice from them?

It kind of comes back to boundaries that I mentioned when talking about family. It's the same conversation to have with yourself when engaging with your friends as a support system. What do you need from them? Do you need them to walk you to and from class? Or if a co-worker is a friend, do you need them to walk you in and out of work like Marissa had mentioned. Or is that not leaving you alone with your abuser if and when you all are out together? Think about what you want these different boundaries to look like. It's also important to think about keeping things with them if you are planning on leaving, or you want to make sure that those items that could be sentimental aren't destroyed. Is that a safe place for you to drop off that photo album or that blanket that your grandma knitted for you? Think about things that you might want if and when you do decide to leave that partner. Is that someone that you can trust to keep it safe and sound?

Boundaries again are going to be huge, so consider that role that you want them to play and be up front. Let them know if you want them to hold onto things for you, or safety plan with you, or give you advice. Or even if it's just to be that listening ear, you ultimately get to decide what is going to be best for you and your healing from this support system.

It's natural to wonder what friends will think of you, and ask yourself the question will they understand, they judge me if they know that this is what I'm going through? That's totally valid to have that worry and that fear of what will they think? But remember, you can only control yourself and not their reactions. So just hold on to that.

Marissa: Some additional supports can also come from your community as well. There may be a local domestic violence or sexual assault agency near you. If you're in Waukesha, it's us here at The Women's Center. Feel free to engage with them, connect with a hotline, get in with an advocate or a counselor, or think about some support groups either virtually or in person. Again, teachers, school counselors, your overall campus safety is going to be really important, again with those points I had mentioned earlier.

Think about the systems that you engage with on a daily or weekly basis. School might be one, and front there, you may find some folks that can support you. That could even

look like studying with somebody new, or spending some time at a particular coffee shop or library and having others around you and having that feeling of not specifically being alone and isolated. Some other community members that can be helpful could look like mentors, or faith leaders. These may be people that you have connected with in the past, they're folks with whom you share values, and they very well could be immense supporters for you.

Teresa: How do we do this? How do we forge these different connections from our support systems that we've been talking about? Whether it is friends that we have engaged with, or whether that is with work, school, family, whatever that might be, how do we start forging those connections again or how do we start forging them to begin with? Know that healing and surviving through these can be hard to do on your own and we all deserve these different support systems and need people to help us through it. What does a healthy support system even look like?

This is different for everyone, and can be made up of all the different systems that we've mentioned, or this could just be one system right now, depending on where you're at in that healing or what is available and or safe to you. This could look like your friends or your family, maybe that's a doctor that you have that you're able to check in with consistently, or maybe that is a local DV agency or a hotline that you're able to give a call to. The key is to identify the different people that you would call in the middle of the night if need be. So, if you don't feel like you can call a friend, is there a 24-hour hotline that you could call? Is there a family member that you know would pick up the phone if you need that?

If you're kind of drawing a blank on how to forge these connections, or you're like "I can't think about someone that I would call at 1 in the morning or even at 5 in the evening", think about who's been there for you in other times of crisis or in other tough times? We know that past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior, and so if that friend or that family member has responded really well, let's say, when we had the flu. We know that they cared about us, they checked in on us, maybe they're going to respond really well when we are doing okay, but when we're struggling too.

So, think about who's been there for you in other tough times. Consider looking beyond your inner circle too. That might be outside of that core group of friends that you have, or the couple family members that you're closest with. Who in your community, or who in your extended family or your friend group do you know that helps others? Even asking yourself that question can kind of tune you into different things that you might not have thought about before. And lastly, think about volunteering if you can. This can be a really great thing for a lot of different reasons, but this can help you feel less isolated and connect with other people that have those similar interests as you.

Marissa: One of the most important connections you can make is with your inner strength. We may forget that we are one of our most important places for support. To start this process, we can look towards our future. We can maybe think of what a bucket list is, a list of things that we want to do over the day, week, month, year, or years. We can work to recognize signals from people that may not be supportive. Starting to become more attuned to what some red flags are. When you get that sort of icky feeling in your stomach, what's going on? What is somebody may be saying to you that prompted that feeling? Finding your inner strength takes a lot of reflection too. Some folks really find that keeping a journal is super helpful, or at the end of the day even just writing a word that describes today. If your goal is to write one word, and you write maybe a whole paragraph, that's great, you still stuck to your goal and then some.

It may be really cool to try something that you haven't done before. Taking a new class or course, or maybe re-engage with a hobby you may have had in the past. Taking that class kind of like Teresa was mentioning, you might find new support systems, new friends, new colleagues that you can turn to when you need. And ultimately, doing something you like or learning new things that you like really helps care for yourself. You know us, we talk about self-care all the time. Self-care is also crucial to finding this inner strength.

If you find yourself slipping into old patterns, or if you feel yourself isolating, ask for help. Your support system is there for you, it's in the name, right? These are folks that are invested in you and want to see you grow and feel happy. It's also important to remind yourself too, that you're not a bad person if bad things happen to you. That means you're not a bad person because you went through abuse. You're not a bad person if you had a bad day in your healing journey. We say all the time, that healing isn't linear, and that there are those natural ebbs and flows. When a day, or a string of days have been particularly low, you haven't lost that progress that you've worked up to at this point. You're still a good person, you're still healing you're still on this journey and you still have that inner strength too.

Teresa: Part of reconnecting with our support systems and part of reconnecting with ourselves like Marissa was talking about, is figuring out how to give ourselves that space, or ask for time away from other people. We may have been conditioned to believe that our needs are not important, that we should not take up that space, whether for ourselves, with others, or within our communities. How do we start that conversation, how do we start to rebuild these? Asking for space can feel really foreign and uncomfortable, especially if this is a completely new concept for you. Self-care is not is not going to be the most comfortable thing if it is something you've been conditioned to not practice for yourself, or not take up that space.

When asking for space, some statements that can be really helpful to just re-engage with yourself as that the most important support network, is talking to a friend or family member or a partner, and saying: “You know, I haven't had a lot of family time in a while. I'm really going to need to spend some time with them today.” Another statement that you can utilize in order to assert that boundary, is saying: “I like spending time with you, but I also need some alone time too.” Which you definitely allowed either in a relationship, in a friendship, or even if you're engaging in a family system. Everyone needs that alone time.

Another statement that you can use when asking for space or really putting yourself first is saying: “I'd like to do my own thing today, can we plan for something tomorrow?” And lastly, this is like the simplest phrase that you could use, but it's also just very direct and honest, saying: “I need space”. There's no harm in asking for that, you definitely deserve to have that safety, to reconnect with yourself, to slow down and then to sit in the quiet or to practice some hobbies or some self-care like Marissa was talking about. You're worthy of taking up that space.

Marissa: All of this that we've mentioned throughout this podcast is in the spirit of ultimately re-claiming these support networks. Which again, involves reconnecting with yourself and your past. How is this relationship affected you? And part of this is also reflecting on what you may have enjoyed in the past and allowing it to guide you with direction for your future steps. It can be scary at first to reach out and start rebuilding some of these relationships.

It takes a lot of self-reflection, and when you're comfortable to do so you can start reaching out to some of these folks or maybe even writing to them too. Who's as this has to be an in-person interaction to start? Whatever your comfort level is should guide you with what your next steps are going to be. Again, it is super important to acknowledge that we can't control other people's responses. They may not understand that abuse, they may not understand abusers, or power and control.

Another common tactic of abuse is being this nice, charming individual when in public, when your abuser is with your support systems, and then flipping that script entirely when they're just with you. Your friends and family may have a different image of who the abuser was, but we can't control their responses. We can only control how we're feeling in the moment and how we respond.

If you are looking for supporters who have that knowledge of abuse, what you've gone through, consider support groups. They're a safe space to talk about abuse. They ultimately help you feel less isolated in the shame and guilt that many survivors struggle

with. In usual circumstances, we hold a support group, but right now, you know we're doing this podcast, so we talk specifically about healing and I'm sort of the dynamics of experiencing abuse. Listening to something like this can be really helpful.

Lastly, it's super important to celebrate those small successes. Overcoming this isolation does not happen overnight, so it's really important to remind yourself of the steps that you have taken big or small, to rebuild and connect. Maybe you did write that word down that you felt at the end of the day, you didn't necessarily reach out to somebody yet, but you made a really, really, important first step and that is worth celebrating. And maybe another day, you've reconnected with one person in your family but not everybody. It's not a race you're going at your own pace, and that is really important and you're doing a great job with it and it's worth acknowledging that.

Teresa: Remember that you had your own friends, you might have had your own family, or hobbies, or interests, or communities that you inherently engaged with that made you, you, before you were in a relationship or before you met that partner. Ultimately when we're talking about how to engage with our support systems and what's going to be best for us moving forward, it shouldn't change because you're in a relationship.

If you're listening to this, and you're starting to see some red flags in that relationship if you're still with that partner, or if you're looking back and healing from abuse that you've experienced in the past, know that that shouldn't change because you're in a relationship.

Healthy relationships are built on that respect for each other, and part of that respect is going to be having your own independence, your own support networks that each one of you can engage with. It's okay to feel supported, it's okay to be heard and it's okay to reach out and get that support that you deserve. You deserve to take up that space even if it might not feel like you deserve it. You're ultimately worthy of that and you deserve it.

Marissa: A really cool resource that may further guide this conversation with yourself is through loveisrespect.org. And we will link this article titled 'Support Systems' with our podcast on our website.

Teresa: Thank you for joining us to learn more about Re-Engaging with your Support Systems. This is the end of season one of our podcast. If you would like to talk with an advocate about your own experience, please call our 24-hour hotline at 262.542.3828. Learn more about The Women's Center at www.twcwaukesha.org. Thank you and be well.