



Wednesday Workshop: Supporting Survivors of Sexual and Domestic Violence

Podcast Transcript Episode 9: June 17, 2020 Reclaiming Your Space

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 Reclaiming Your Space. This is a really important conversation to have after leaving an abusive relationship, where we may be struggling to find out who we really are as survivors. While it's incredible to have our own power and control return to us, it can be really overwhelming, and we might not know where to start. With that, we'll go over what it means to reinvest in ourselves and tap into our own power to nourish ourselves.

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

Teresa: I'm Teresa the Dual Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Counselor at The Women's Center. To start, we have to ask ourselves the question: "Where am I at?" in order to determine how we reclaim that power back for ourselves, or how do we start to reclaim our space? We know that while healing from abusive relationships or from an assault, it can be really common to ask yourself questions like: "How did I let myself get here?" Or "Why do I feel like I have no control over my life?" And this question is a really big one, "When will I feel better and will I even feel better?" You know, is that possible? Abuse hinges on someone using power and control against that other partner, particularly after working to gain the trust of that partner. Abusers are really good at making their victims feel small, unworthy and not heard as individuals, and sometimes even out of their own bodies. So that just dissociation piece that you might have heard us talk about in prior podcasts. These feelings often become our means of coping through the trauma and abuse, and in the moment, they often ensure survival.

Marissa: Even after the abuse ends it can be hard to unlearn these patterns of thinking. This isn't your fault by any means. Reclaiming space after abuse means allowing yourself to take control of your identity, and also taking control of your self-esteem and your voice. Like healing in general, it is a process, and a practice. We'll be going over what it means to reclaim different aspects of yourself in hopes of beginning this healing journey.

Teresa: How do we begin to look at reclaiming ourselves, whether we are still in that relationship or after we left that partner, or left that abusive relationship? It's important to take some time to explore who you are right now. If you tuned into our podcast last week about figuring out what your belief systems were or your value systems, this is going to be a really good conversation to engage in alongside that. Asking yourself: What are some of those core values or beliefs that you hold to, to be true about yourself? What are some things that bring joy? Are there things that make you feel filled up? If it's easier to think about what are some things that don't bring you joy, that's okay to do too.

By recognizing what fills you up versus what drains you or what drains you versus filling yourself up, this can also help re-establish what your boundaries are. It might be difficult to figure out what you enjoy doing right now or what you have enjoyed doing in the past. Maybe focusing on things that you for sure know that you don't like can also give you a really good idea of where some of those beliefs or values stand. It's also important to explore some positive affirmations. Asking yourself questions about: What is your favorite thing about yourself? What are some good things that you would say about a loved one if you are struggling finding some good things to say about yourself? If we treat ourselves like we would that close friend or family member we start to practice that self-compassion, that self-love and patience with ourselves which are all key things for the healing process. That's not to say that that's not going to be a difficult thing, you might be giving yourself that time and space to practice self-love and compassion for the first time in a long time. Be patient with yourself throughout that process.

Marissa: It's important too to note that we aren't static individuals. We are constantly changing, growing, healing, and we exist in different spaces that are all impacted by abuse and trauma. Those things don't just impact our interpersonal realm, they impact how we operate in public, maybe at work, with friends. These power and control dynamics really stick with us and really color all of our experiences while we're trying to heal. It's important to acknowledge the courage it took to break away from the abuse, to take your own power back, to say enough, no more. That's really huge, and that is one of the most difficult things to do. We know on average it takes about seven or eight times to leave an abusive relationship because it's so hard to firmly say no and to firmly move on.

In reclaiming yourself, it's helpful to try to reframe those lingering negative thoughts. We'll be talking about just a little bit more later on, but really focusing on what your strengths are and who you are, that is good, because you are a good person. And recognize again, that you deserve good things no matter what anyone else says. Now some folks may be thinking, isn't this easier said than done? It absolutely can be. I want to be upfront with that especially in the beginning processes of reclaiming yourself and healing. I want you to know that you're not alone and it really does take again a lot of courage and strength to begin thinking these thoughts even. And you're doing a good job no matter where you're at in this path.

Teresa: We can't really talk about reclaiming ourselves without talking about reclaiming the different systems and support networks that we have engaged in in the past, or maybe have lost touch with due to the abuse too. Our social support system, our support networks that we surround yourself with, can be a huge protective factor when we are planning on leaving that relationship, whether we have left that relationship, or whether we're moving and healing from that relationship. This is crucial because we know that isolation is a really common power and control tactic that abusers utilize in order to gain and maintain control over their partner. That partner might have asked you or demanded you to not be around people, not communicate with certain friends, or visit family, or go to different events like a birthday party, or a park, or at your favorite store that maybe once was important to you.

That isolation piece can oftentimes be looked at in the way that we're communicating with people, but even isolating yourself from activities that you once enjoyed doing. If you really loved listening to music and that partner said, "No, I don't want you doing that" because it's giving you that opportunity to reflect, to grow in yourself. There are different ways that abusers really isolate us, not just from other people in our lives but from ourselves.

It's really crucial that you understand that you deserve to be a part of a strong supportive network and community, regardless of where you're at in your process. Whether you have been isolated for years and you are just kind of coming to that realization of, "I want to rebuild a little bit more". You deserve that. Everyone does regardless of where they're at in that relationship for that healing from the abuse and trauma.

Marissa: Some ways to start reclaiming some of those support networks, again is reconnecting with yourself and your past. Thinking about how has that relationship or that assault affected you? Reflect on what you may have enjoyed before that and allow it to guide you with direction for future steps. Like Teresa was kind of mentioning before, maybe that isolation was a part of your life, what was that music that you enjoyed? What

was that song that made you reflect? What were some other things that you like to do either with yourself or with others? Additionally, if you're feeling ready and safe to, reaching out and rebuilding some of those relationships that may have faded in that isolation or you feel like you want to strengthen. You can do this on your own too, you can reflect on those relationships and if you're comfortable you can reach out or write to them, or give them a call if you're, if you're feeling comfortable doing so. If you're not quite there yet, maybe start planning what you would want to say to some former supports. You can even write that down and keep it to yourself, wherever you're at. But when you are feeling safe and comfortable to do so, it really can help to try to reach out and try to rebuild those relationships.

Acknowledge that we can't necessarily control other people's responses. They may not understand the abuse that you've gone through, who abusers are, and again, what their value systems may be, or even power and control in general. They unfortunately may feel like you cut them out of your life, for whatever reason, and may not understand that that was an isolation tactic that was not out of your control. You're never under any obligation to explain yourself. If you are feeling comfortable letting that person in and being vulnerable, you know that is totally up to you.

There are also other ways to reclaim some support networks too. You can join organizations, support groups and try some new things like new hobbies, maybe a book club, others that enjoy the same things you do. That might be a little bit strained right now while we're still under some Covid related restrictions, but I know there's a wide array of virtual groups where you can try these new hobbies, where you can talk about books, groups of survivors who will understand those power control dynamics and will understand that isolation and may have quite similar goals to you. Those things are really crucial, as well taking some time to feel supported by yourself by maybe listening to podcasts like this or again any, any, of that music.

Teresa: Like Marissa had mentioned, reconnecting with your community through different organizations or support groups or hobbies is going to be really crucial to start reclaiming what you want your support network to look like. Due to those Covid restrictions that we might be functioning under right now, there are a lot of different ways that you can still engage or re-engage with some of those systems. That could look like even taking that virtual class like Marissa had mentioned.

If that is even getting outside of your home or the place where you're staying, and taking a walk around that neighborhood, getting to know your community, even if it is by yourself right now. There's something really healing about even just getting outside of that physical space that you're in right now and interacting with people on the sidewalk from a safe distance, or even just being around people while also socially distancing.

That is definitely a way to reconnect with your community and to reconnect and reclaim your neighborhood for yourself as well.

Support groups are also really big as Marissa had mentioned. This is really going to be that safe space to talk about maybe that abuse you experienced, and to feel less isolated in that shame and guilt that many survivors struggle with. That isolation, as we had mentioned before, is a huge power and control tactic that abusers utilize to maintain control over us. Knowing that there are still going to be those virtual support groups that you could engage in, or podcasts such as this one where you can learn and grow, and really take this time to just reflect on what it is that you've been through and what you want your future look like is also a great way to connect with support networks like The Women's Center or like your local DV agency. Still a lot of different ways that you can still utilize this, even in the midst while we're experiencing right now.

And lastly, look to celebrate those small successes. This is again, going to be something that's easier said than done, much like a lot of the things that were talking about. But it is overcoming a lot of isolation that you might have experienced. You even walking outside and interacting with a neighbor from a safe distance could be a huge step in the right direction to reclaim yourself in your support networks.

We know that overcoming isolation or even being comfortable with interacting with people doesn't happen overnight. It's going to feel maybe a little uncomfortable at first. You're going to ask questions of can I talk to that friend? Or, is it safe for me to talk to that family member? Because maybe we were conditioned not to prior to leaving that relationship. Just remind yourself of the steps that you have chosen to take for yourself big and small to rebuild and reconnect and hold on to those.

Marissa: Another important thing to look at while we're reclaiming these aspects of ourselves is reclaiming some of our spaces. We know that abuse and trauma can, and often does occur where we live. We also know that and it impacts every facet of our lives. Maybe not all of the abuse occurred at home, maybe it was a lot of text messages we received at work or while we were out with friends that really started to color our experience of what those spaces meant to us. To the point of becoming a trigger to us. This may look like reminders of events, again, those triggers of the past. Those can be where we live or where we spend a lot of our time.

And creating a safe place, whether we're still in that relationship or out of that relationship and feeling triggered, really comes down to do safety planning. That helps us take our power back, make sure that we can navigate through these spaces safely, and it allows us to look at the things that we can control. While we're in these spaces that may not feel safe to us immediately, we can look to see what those immediate visual

triggers are. Is there something on the wall that just makes us really want to jump out of our skin? Can we hide that, can we throw it away? Can we maybe try re-arranging a space? Again, removing something that reminds you of the abuser, other things like that.

We can also try to eliminate maybe some of those sensory triggers as well. Maybe there is a certain air freshener we were using while a lot of abuse occurred. Maybe we can change that out, maybe we don't listen to a certain kind of music while we're at home if that's something that has been a trigger to us. The key piece here is working to create a comforting space for you to feel at ease in your current environment again, whether that's your home or wherever you are staying at. Whether that's at work, whether that's even in your vehicle. Adding some sort of grounding elements to help you self soothe, comfort and promote relaxation, that's going to be really helpful. Some examples of this might be some softer blankets, a favorite essential oil or air freshener, enjoying some tea, things like that really help bring us back to that present and out of that trigger associated with where we are in that moment.

If we still aren't feeling totally safe in our present environment, we can try doing an exercise with safe space. If we can't physically be in a safe space right now, we can try to imagine what that safe space looks like and try to go there with our mind. Whether that's a nice sandy beach or somewhere up in the mountains, some sort of space where you feel like you can be more at peace if you can't physically go there. Imagining it and more specifically imagining yourself going to that space is really helpful.

Teresa: Part of reclaiming your spaces that you interact with too is looking at reclaiming your body. This is a big piece not just if you have experienced any type of physical abuse or sexual abuse, but that emotional abuse or the verbal abuse that we might have experienced too, definitely can be embodied physically or the way that we view ourselves physically.

Ways to do this is going to be done through finding ways to nourish ourselves. That's going to be emotionally nourishing ourselves, physically nourishing ourselves, and maybe spiritually nourishing ourselves. This is done by attuning to our own bodily cues, which might not be the most comfortable thing if we had engaged in different survival tactics like this dissociation in order to get through that trauma, to get through that abuse. Paying attention to the way our body responds to certain things or the way our bodies are cueing us into our fight, flight, freeze response, might not feel really great or might not feel really comfortable or familiar. This might be you allowing yourself to recognize that for the first time in a long time. Maybe you are safe now to pay attention to how you are responding physically when you're feeling like you're in danger. This might also look like allowing yourself that space to rest if you're feeling tired. Telling

yourself, “I'm feeling exhausted, so I'm going to take a ten-minute break and I'm going to make myself a cup of tea and just read a book”.

You might not have had that space before. You might have heard or felt those cues in your body but may not have been able to respond in an appropriate way in order to take care of yourself. That might also look like giving yourself the space too, to open the express emotion if you're feeling angry or sad, or you know that permission to feel joy or happiness if you are. Oftentimes abusers will isolate us from people but also those emotions that we're experiencing, so that you're not able to access how your alarm bells are going off in your head. If you're sad, exploring that, owning that, feeling that in your body is important. One way to do this is through creating a self-care plan. And Marissa and I probably sound like a broken record when we talk about self-care and self-care plans, but that is because it is so crucial.

Every survivor is going to need something to turn back to in order to help them cope with different triggers, or in order to help them cope with moving forward and reclaiming their spaces. Part of your body and figuring out what it needs is providing it with that preventive care for yourself. That might look like you sitting down when you're feeling really good and feeling really grounded, and saying, “Okay, I know I feel better when I get outside three times a week so I'm going to make it and make a point in my self-care to set that goal for myself.” Or maybe that that self-care goal is simply drinking more water throughout the day so that you can physically take care of your body, emotionally take care of your body.

Preventive care is super important when we are looking at self-care plans, but it's also crucial too to have different reactive measures in place in your self-care plan in case you're feeling like you're out of touch with your body, or in case you're feeling like I can't tune in and figure out what it needs right now. That may look like different grounding techniques that we've mentioned too. If that is done through sensory grounding, that blanket or that cozy space like Marissa was talking about. Is that going to re-connect you to your body, to cue you into what it needs.

And lastly, it's important to cultivate a space to listen to your body. This again, is going to be something that comes easier with practice. It's allowing yourself to take up just as much space as others, and as you would allow others. Sitting in our bodies or sitting in the ways that our bodies respond to feelings might not be comfortable. It might not be familiar, it might not be something we really enjoy doing, but the more you start to tune in and figure out “my body has got me to this point now, so how has it done it?”, you can really start to see how your body has carried you to this point. It's been a vessel that has allowed you to survive through some really difficult things and it's just taking that moment to reconnect and figure out what it needs from you now.

Marissa: And to that point, as a brief reminder, you have survived your worst days, so you deserve your best days too. Part of reclaiming your body is also reclaiming your mind and rebuilding some of that self-esteem. Some ways to start this process are reflecting on some positive thoughts about yourself. That could manifest in so many different ways.

Some folks really enjoy gratitude journaling, writing some positive things down about yourself, the list goes on and on. It can be really helpful to make it as visible as you can in your space. Whether that looks like using maybe some dry erase on your mirror, writing yourself some kind words, leaving yourself notes around your living area, maybe on your alarm clock when you wake up, maybe on your front door right before you grab your keys. wherever you're going to see it, wherever you feel you may need those reminders most.

Another part of rebuilding some of the self-esteem is to make sure that you are feeling nurtured. So, take that walk, treat yourself, drink some water, I promise you, you deserve all of that and more. Whatever you need to do to make yourself feel good, you not only deserve that you are allowed to do that, and would encourage you to start thinking about some ways that you may be able to nurture yourself more throughout the day.

It's also important to start reflecting and observing. What thoughts are coming up about yourself? What are some of those patterns? And ultimately, where are those thoughts coming from? Are those words that we may have been told from our abuser, are they beliefs that have come from that past in order to gain or maintain some sort of power and control? And are we able to maybe start challenging some of those thoughts?

Lastly, it's important to be kind to yourself. Which again, is easier said than done, but I want you to know that you are healing and working towards that growth and it takes time, and you deserve that patience.

Teresa: When we're talking about rebuilding self-esteem, something that goes hand-in-hand with that, is exploring the different strengths that you inherently embody. This might be something that again, you might be a little out of touch with or you might not be able to recognize your own strengths right away when you ask yourself that question.

It may be difficult to challenge those past patterns that abusers have instilled in you. And asking yourself, where do my strengths lie? You can kind of come up short or you can say, "You know, I really don't feel like I have any". That's directly coming from a place of that abuser's messaging that they were utilizing, isolating you from yourself. We

know that every individual, every survivor has unique strengths that make them, them, and that make you, you, and have allowed you to survive through what you have and get you to this point today.

We have a worksheet that we are going to be linking on our website. And this is a really great resource that helps you kind of explore what those different strengths are going to be. It can be difficult to just ask ourselves, just generally, what are my strengths, and we might not be able to come up with anything very quickly. This resource is really great to not just bridge that gap between what a strength is versus what it's not, but it allows you to look at the ways that you embody different strengths in different domains of your life. It's going to be kind of cool to look at that first page, where they give you an opportunity to have different words that describe strengths that you might hold. If none of them really fit for you, is that something that you can fill in? Is kindness a strength that you inherently embody? Is humor a strength that you're able to hold on to and something that makes you unique? Once you can determine what those different strengths that are unique to you are, you go through three different categories.

Each section, or each different category, looks at these different domains in your life. We know that we all interact in so many different systems day-to-day. It's going to ask you to list some strengths in that specific category. So first, is going to be that interpersonal relationships. We are going to look at relationships maybe we have currently or in the past that we've had with friends, families, or partners that we've engaged with. Listing those strengths in that category and then, describing a specific time that maybe kindness had helped you when you are talking about your interpersonal relationships. Were you able to help that family member out when you saw that they are really struggling, and you were able to tap into that kindness that inherent strength that you have in order to connect with them?

From there you'll describe two new ways to use your personal strengths in that arena. Looking at different ways now that you could kind of implement those things in those areas of your life. From interpersonal relationships, you can also explore that professional domain. That can look like past or present work or school endeavors that you might have engaged in and explore what those strengths were in the past that helped you, and two new ways that you could use those personal strengths in that area.

And lastly, looking at your personal strengths that you have. That's going to look like hobbies that you might have, interests, activities that you enjoy doing. That's going to be very, very specific and individualized to you. Looking at different strengths. Maybe perseverance is something that is a strength that you have, that allows you to kind of push through a difficult time or push through when you hit a roadblock with a hobby. Everyone has different things that help get through them the day, but also help them

interact with all these different domains in their life. I think this is just a really great resource if you are struggling with having positive self-talk phrases for yourself, or you are working at rebuilding your self-esteem like Marissa was talking about. Rebuilding that self-esteem and exploring what your strengths are going to go hand-in-hand, and this is just a really great experiential to try out a bit.

Marissa: So, while we're starting to explore some of our strengths, it is really natural to start thinking about maybe our weaknesses as well, or for that negative self-talk to start to creep back up on us. That is normal, that happens to so many folks especially while they're trying to find their footing in their own self esteem in their self-worth. That said, when those do come up, it is really important to start challenging some of those thoughts and some of those past patterns as well.

We adapt to the environments that we're in, the relationships that were in, and so too do the patterns we utilize to survive. Especially when we're either in or coming out of relationships that had a lot of that power and control, had a lot of those abusive tactics and dynamics. When we're starting to come out of those, it's almost natural to continue to feel that power and control on ourselves.

A helpful way to start challenging those patterns is to recognize some distortions in our thoughts. Our minds can trick us into believing so many inaccurate truths about ourselves. Again, we may believe that we deserve to be small, or we only should speak when you're spoken to, or that our thoughts and ideas don't matter. We genuinely believe those when we're told those quite often, so it's important to recognize that that is actually a distortion in our thought, and that those things are actually untrue. From there, we can start challenging that thought. We can stop and evaluate, is this accurate? Would I talk to a friend this way? That point is huge.

Oftentimes we can be so harsh and negative towards ourselves, but we would never say those things to a close friend or family member. Even though we are allowed to sort of be our own friend and be our own teammate. From there, we can start to release some judgment that we may hold about ourselves. We understand that judgment happens. It happens to us all and it's important to recognize your own reaction again, observe it, and when you feel ready start to release it.

Lastly, and again, totally a broken record here, focus on those strengths. When you have a bad thought come up, how can we spin that into something good about ourselves? For every bad thought, can we list something that we like about ourselves? Is there any sort of mantra that you can repeat to yourself that makes you feel strong, that makes you feel secure? Some examples of this could be: I am safe. I am allowed to take up space. My thoughts are valuable. My voice has power. Whatever makes sense to you. I know I've

suggested before spending a couple minutes or a couple hours on Pinterest finding some quotes that speak to us. First of all, is a lot of fun, and second of all can be really helpful in determining what speaks to us and what sort of highlights those strengths. Similar to that worksheet, sometimes we don't necessarily have the words to express how we feel so finding some of those either on a page or in a really pretty quote that we find on the internet that I can really help in challenging those past patterns.

Teresa: Remember that you do not need to shrink yourself in order to make room for others, and especially for abusers. We've said it before, and we'll say it again--you are worthy of taking up that space. You deserve that. And it's okay to take steps forward for yourself, if not for anyone else. That is the most important thing that you can do. It's really okay to want something more for yourself, whether you are in an abusive relationship and you are considering ways to leave. Or, if you are questioning that behavior, is that okay it's okay for someone to treat me like that? It's okay to want more for yourself, and to want to grow. Ultimately it's okay to choose you and to put yourself first.

Marissa: Some resources that we had utilized for this podcast, again the strengths worksheet that Teresa had mentioned will be available on our website. And also, we talked about quite a few things that we've covered more in-depth in other podcasts as part of this series. If you haven't listened to them before, or if you want to relisten to them, maybe some good topics to revisit would be, "Grounding Through Turbulent Times", "Self-Care and Emotional Safety Planning", the one we did last week, "Understanding Your Values". If you maybe don't have the time or space to listen through those all again, we do include transcripts of every podcast that we record, so that's going to be essentially a script of what we have said during all of these podcasts. And those are really helpful to revisit as you're going through this healing journey.

Teresa: Thank you for joining us to learn more about Reclaiming Your Space. Our next session will be about Re-engaging With Support Systems.

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.