



## **Wednesday Workshop: Supporting Survivors of Sexual and Domestic Violence**

### **Podcast Transcript**

**Season 3 Episode 10: June 16, 2021**

### **Identity After Abuse: Who Am I?**

Presented by Marissa, Adult Domestic Violence Advocate, and Nouchee, Dual Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Advocate

NOUCHEE: Hello and welcome to The Women's Center Wednesday Workshop, a Nouchee: Hello and welcome to The Women's Center Wednesday Workshop, a podcast that shares helpful insight for survivors, community members, and service providers alike. The Women's Center is based out of Waukesha, Wisconsin. We welcome and serve survivors of all ages, races, gender identities, sexual orientations, abilities, nationalities, and immigration statuses. The mission of The Women's Center is to provide safety, shelter, and support to empower all impacted by domestic abuse, sexual violence, child abuse, and trafficking. Each episode will feature instruction on a healing topic. Today, our topic is Identity After Abuse: Who Am I? We are your hosts, my name is Nouchee and I'm the Dual Domestic Abuse/Sexual Violence Advocate at The Women's Center.

MARISSA: And my name is Marissa and I'm the Adult Domestic Violence Advocate with The Women's Center. So what is identity? Via Psychology Today, "Identity encompasses the memories, experiences, relationships and values that creates one sense of self. This amalgamation [or combination] creates a steady sense of who one is over time, even as new facets are developed and incorporated into one's identity." They go on to say that "Identity includes the many relationships people cultivate, such as their identity as a child, friend, partner, and parent. It involves external characteristics over which a person has little or no control, such as height, race, or socioeconomic class. Identity also encompasses political opinions, moral attitudes, and religious beliefs, all of which guide the choices one makes on a daily basis." So, it's normal to question or reflect on our identity from time to time, but in abuse, someone else may be trying to actively change or control who you are and the choices that you make. We'll discuss how abuse impacts our sense of identity and ultimately how to start to reclaim your identity for yourself.

NOUCHEE: In abuse, you may feel like you cannot be yourself, or you may have been flat out told that your interests and your identity are flawed. You may feel a sense of identity loss, so feeling like you are a shell of your former self. An abuser may use your identity against you; for example, being a different race, class, ability, and/or sexuality

than your abuser. You may have been isolated from supports who you were able to lean on in the past, and share interests and community with.

An abuser may possibly not allow you to work and/or pursue your own goals. An abuser may have gotten mad at you for disclosing to friends and family, and may have caused you to no longer feel comfortable reaching out for help and/or uncomfortable communicating your feelings. We also know that a common feeling can be an abuser “knowing you better than you know yourself,” which may lead to questioning your own identity or hiding parts of yourself. In an abusive relationship, we know that gaslighting can often happen and may cause you to feel like you can't trust your own opinions or yourself. You may be struggling with the idea of not knowing what part you were responsible for in the abuse, but again, we want to reiterate that abuse is never your fault. You did nothing to excuse or accept this behavior.

Through abuse, we may also feel like we are losing our sense of strength and/or voice, and may feel like we can no longer stick up for ourselves. Thinking that, you know, “I chose this partner so how can I know that I won't put myself through this again?” This can create self-doubt, which can carry over into other relationships as well. It may help to look at a Power and Control Wheel to help identify the things that may have happened in the relationship, and realize that you are not responsible for those things. Do not carry that burden, it is not yours to bear, and work to trust yourself again in your healing.

MARISSA: And so with that, taking the first step can look and feel different for everyone. This could be taking the first step to exit a relationship, or taking the first step to redefine ourselves and take control back. Again via Psychology Today, “Reflecting on the discrepancy between who one is and who one wants to be, can be a powerful catalyst for change,” meaning that you can use this reflection to grow and ultimately heal. While reflecting on the relationship, this may bring about feelings of recognizing that you've lost parts of yourself, it may bring about self-blame, and/or contemplating how to regain your power, and sometimes this can be overwhelming. Feelings of hopelessness may occur, along with grief over who you were before the abuse, and it's okay to grieve yourself.

You may also feel lost and not sure about where to start or how to move forward. You may be contemplating this in the relationship or out—there's no wrong way to start. And with that, too, we know that the first step can be a difficult one, and again, you may feel overwhelmed in the process. I want you to remember that the journey to self-discovery is worth it because you are worth it.

NOUCHEE: So we know that our values play a big part in our identity. Values are the core of us, our worldview, our sense of self, our moral compass. Our values make up who we are and reflect our true nature, so what are they? Values are our basic beliefs of life that motivate our emotions, thoughts and behaviors. For example, many people value honesty and respect, and this guides how they go about life.

An abuser, on the other hand, is likely to value power and control. These values inform the tactics that they may use to harm others. If you like to learn more about the “why” of abuse, we are holding an in-person workshop on June 23, discussing The Root of Abuse. If you'd like to learn more about values in general, we will link the previous podcast about values. We will also link a value exploration activity. If you feel like you've fallen out of touch with your values or identity, this exercise can be helpful in reconnecting with that sense of self. Value exploration might also highlight differences between yourself and partner, and this could help you find reasons to leave your abusive relationship.

**MARISSA:** Sometimes after coming out of an abusive relationship, you may feel lost or unsure of who you are outside of that relationship. We want to encourage you to take this time to get to know yourself again. Some ways you can do this is by taking yourself on a date and asking yourself some of those fun first date questions, like “What makes you unique? What's something that you want to learn more about? What are you most passionate about? What's your favorite memory? What are you most proud of,” and so on. So questions that you might ask another person on a date, ask them to yourself and reconnect with that part of you.

You may also try new activities, even if you're unsure about whether you'll like them. So, looking for free events or activities near you, trying a friend's hobby, watching or listening to a genre of TV, movie, or music that you're unfamiliar with... You may be surprised at what you're interested in. But that said, if you've tried something and it doesn't feel like a fit, don't force it. This practice is about finding what fills you up, not what drains you.

On that note, validate your own opinions, wants or needs, and choices. You may be used to an abuser telling you whether you are right or wrong, and/or controlling your every move. We encourage you to explore how making your own choices feels, and trusting yourself again. Remember that you're not too much; your opinions and feelings are valuable, and you're allowed to take up space and have your voice heard. Always.

**NOUCHEE:** Another great way to find your sense of identity after abuse may be through connecting with a community who share similar experiences. A community can be a group of people with similar interests and experiences. This can show us that it's okay to like what we like and/or be who we are, and have pride in our identity. Spending time with people who have had similar life experiences can be an opportunity to share goals and strategies to heal, so for example, joining support groups. It may also feel comforting to simply be able to relate to someone or know someone who has gone through what you have. With finding a community, you're able to break that isolation by branching out or reconnecting with past supports you've lost contact with. It may be helpful to reconnect with those you have had healthy relationships with, and seek out relationships that fill you up instead of drain you. You may also visit a community center

near you to find people that you share an identity with. So for example, race or ethnicity, sexuality and gender, hometown, sharing a favorite show or sports team, and more.

MARISSA: Finding a community of those who can relate to you can be very impactful, but we also want to acknowledge that victim/survivors don't all experience the same exact form of abuse, and they do not heal the same. We know that healing isn't linear; if you know other victim/survivors and they look like they've progressed in a way that you have not, it doesn't mean that you are "healing wrong." Everyone experiences trauma differently, and we know that any and all forms of abuse are traumatic to those victimized by it. It's important to not invalidate yourself and/or others for what they went through, even if you feel like others have gone through more. Your experience is valid.

After abuse, victim/survivors may try to go back to who they were before the abuse, but who you are after the abuse is not worse. You are not broken, nothing is wrong with you and you are doing the very hard work of healing and strengthening yourself. Remember that this healing journey is your journey, take your time and find what works for you. It's okay to seek support in finding your identity and trusting yourself again. So advocates, mental health professionals, and other supports can help you think through these concepts and provide education on self-worth, healthy relationships, trust, boundaries, and more. Having supports can help empower you to rediscover your identity and values. You don't have to go out alone if you don't want to.

NOUCHEE: We wanted to incorporate some tools that may be helpful in finding your identity after abuse. Again, we know that this can feel really overwhelming, so take baby steps, break things down, and take your time. So looking at a self-care wheel for ideas on how to take care of yourself in multiple aspects, (mentally, spiritually, physically, emotionally, and more), filling out a handout where you're able to identify who you are or who you want to be in the different contexts of your life (so who you are with friends, family, with yourself, professionally, and spiritually), a worksheet on filling out your strengths and qualities, a self-esteem journal, and a self-assessment handout as well.

MARISSA: And these are an abundance of tools that may be helpful, but you're also welcome to journal independently or do whatever works out for you, but these can be some really helpful tools.

Thank you so much for joining us to learn more about Identity After Abuse: Who Am I? This is the end of season three of our podcast, with the next season beginning in August, so look for those topics coming soon.

The Women's Center focuses our work in partnering with clients to overcome barriers and gain a life free from violence. Our work is grounded in equity, upheld by inclusion, accountability, self-reflection, and continual growth.

We believe that it is important for survivors to feel seen and heard. We believe that Black Lives Matter because we cannot end violence without addressing the distinct injustices that Black and Indigenous People of Color face. We know that all forms of oppression are ultimately connected, and when we center individuals most impacted, we are also supporting survivors who have faced any form of violence. While we are not experts in anti-racism work, we aspire to be allies in this movement; we all have a responsibility to contribute to unlearning racism and intersecting forms of oppression that take place in our communities.

If you would like to talk with an advocate about your own experience with abuse, please call our 24-Hour Hotline at 262.542.3828. Learn more about The Women's Center at [www.twcwaukesha.org](http://www.twcwaukesha.org), and find the resources mentioned on this episode by clicking Resources, then Podcasts on our website. Thank you and be well.