

# Rebecca's Story: Family Violence Interventions and Strategies



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# Introduction

Dr. Susan Hillock is an Associate Professor of Social Work at the University of British Columbia- Okanagan. She has over 25 years experience working and teaching in the area of family violence. Kaitlynn Pecora is a social work graduate with an interest in working with families and seniors. This book evolved from Kaitlynn and Dr. Hillock's collaborative classroom work. Both authors support a feminist analysis of the causes of violence in Western society and share a commitment to stop violence.

All illustrations in this book are from PLAYMOBIL®.

Once upon a time there was a young woman named Rebecca. She was sweet and kind and had been taught by her mother to be passive, accommodating, and non-aggressive; the most desirable qualities in a woman (Hillock, 2010). Rebecca had a difficult childhood; she lived with her parents in low-income housing and did not have many friends. She often heard her father scream at her mother and watched as he hit and beat her. This made her feel anxious and afraid and she became depressed for some time.



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“Children who are present during episodes of domestic violence endure many of the anxieties and tensions that accompany the dynamics of intimate violence as if they were directly involved” (Vine, Trocme, & Finlay, 2006, p.155).

“Girl children who are abused or who witness abuse against their mothers may be particularly vulnerable to being abused as they grow into young women” (Health Canada, 2001, p.1).

Rebecca fell in love with a strong and independent man named Gary. He promised to protect Rebecca and felt that it was his role to control, make all of the decisions, and dominate their relationship (Hillock, 2010). Rebecca thought that they were a happy couple for some time. They had a beautiful two-year-old daughter named Nicole.



Gary became unemployed. This increased the stress in their relationship and he often became angry with her. He yelled at her when he thought that she had said or did something wrong or after he had a couple drinks. Rebecca did not understand this behaviour but knew she must have been doing something to upset her husband. “It’s my fault,” she said to herself (see Table 3, p.9).

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Abuse often begins with emotional abuse which is present before other forms of abuse, and remains in the relationship after other forms of abuse have diminished (Rinfret-Raynor, Pâquet-Deehy, Larouche, & Cantin, 1992).

The Violence Against Women Survey (VAWS) found “higher rates of violence against women in homes where there was unemployment, low family income, and low occupational status” (Todd & Lundy, 2006, p.341).

After a couple months, Gary still could not find a job. Since Gary had suggested Rebecca quit her job to take care of Nicole after she was born, there was no steady income. Thankfully, Gary had money saved up, so there was enough to pay the bills and feed the family.



He continued to spend his days on the couch watching TV and occasionally having a few drinks. Although Rebecca rarely saw friends and family, some of the days were good. Rebecca and Gary would share a laugh and enjoy going for walks with Nicole like they had before the violence started. He would not always be angry.

However, when things started to get tense and Rebecca could tell Gary was getting upset, she knew what was coming next...

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An abusive male also isolates their partner from friends and family, contributing to their control over the woman (Unicef, 2000) (see Table 1, p.8).

Gary would yell at Rebecca, call her “useless” and tell her she could not do anything right. He started to hit her and push her down if Rebecca tried to defend herself. If she cried too loud, he would say, “If you don’t shut up, I’ll kill you”. After each episode, Gary would withdraw and become calm for some time. However, Rebecca knew that the tension and yelling would always start again. She spent her days tip-toeing around him, trying not to make him upset. She felt depressed and anxious, and had no appetite (Unicef, 2000).

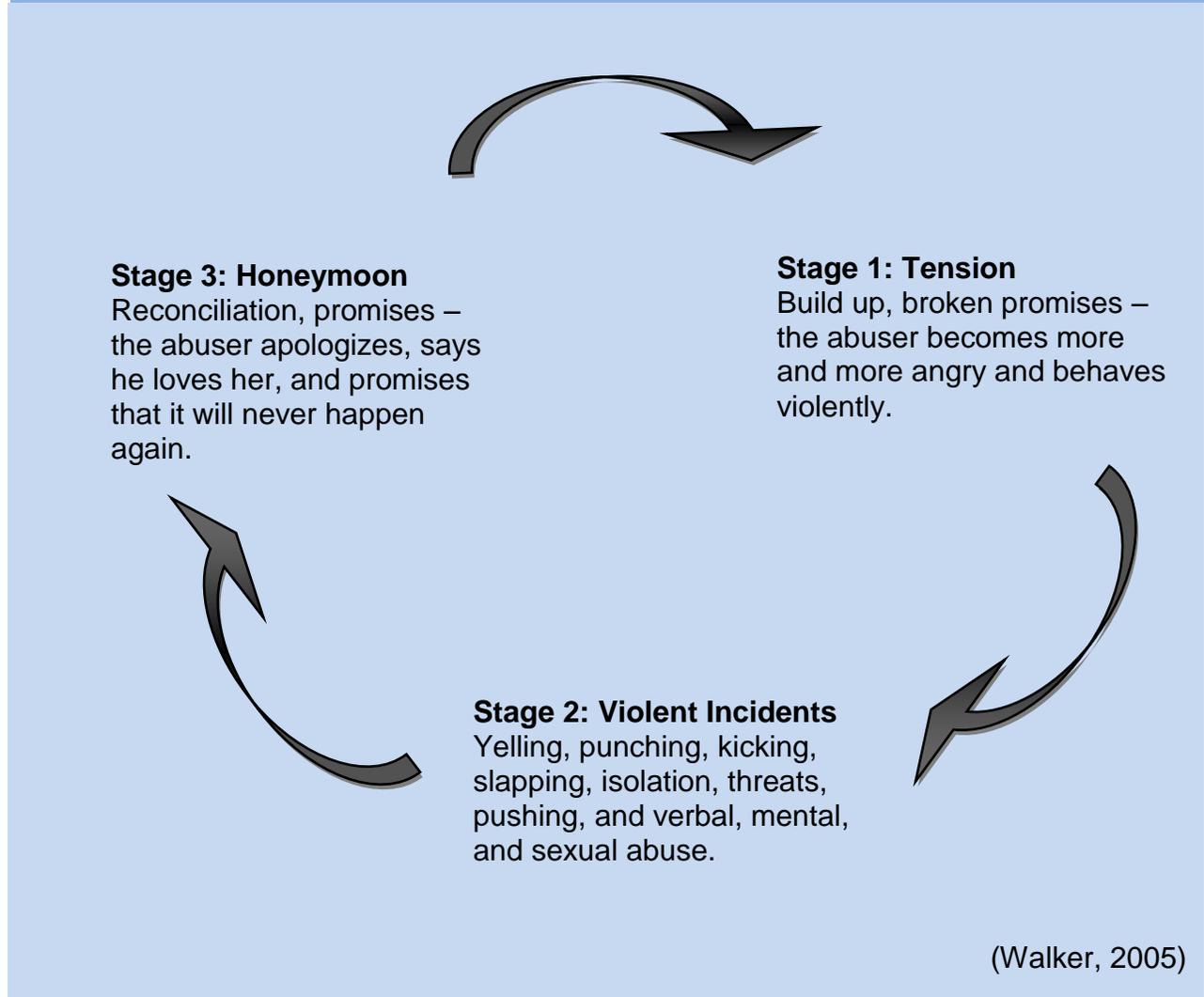


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When women are being abused, some of their symptoms may include “post-traumatic stress syndrome, panic attacks, depression, sleeping and eating disturbances, elevated blood pressure, alcoholism, drug abuse, and lowself-esteem.” (Unicef, 2000, p.9).

One day, when at the park with Nicole and a friend, Rebecca was upset and distracted. Noticing a bruise under Rebecca's eye, her friend asked if she was okay? Although Rebecca felt ashamed and frightened to admit what her husband was like at home, her friend recognized the signs. The next day, her friend gave Rebecca a pamphlet about family violence which explained the root causes of family violence.

**Table 1 | The Cycle of Violence**



## Table 2 | Root Causes of Family Violence

### Cultural Factors:

The rigid gender roles, stereotypes, and the social conditioning that occurs with these concepts in society can lead to domestic violence (Rinfret-Raynor et al., 1992). The patriarchal ideologies in society support dominance of men over women; and both men and women internalize these. Woman abuse is “linked to structural relations of sexism, racism, colonialism, class exploitation, and globalization” (Todd & Lundy, 2006, p.346). The multigenerational transmission process, which is similar to social conditioning, also plays a part in the oppression and abuse of women (Nichols, 2010). Todd and Lundy (2006) state that “behaviour is learned from those who are influential in our lives (p. 350). Therefore, violence and the oppression of women is seen as a learned behaviour which can influence and be passed down through generations.

### Economic Factors:

Due to the sexual division of labour which results in women making 20% less wages than male co-workers, women depend economically on men (QMI Agency, 2010). Todd and Lundy (2006) state that “unequal economic power and economic dependence...of the woman, [can increase the] women’s isolation within the family” (p.340). When men dominate relationships, it can lead to financial abuse, as well as physical, sexual, and emotional abuse.

### Political Factors:

Women are under-represented in “power, politics, the media and in the legal and medical professions” (Unicef, 2000, p.7). Domestic violence is not openly discussed and women who are being abused are often trapped in silence; they seldom speak out to promote change (Rinfret-Raynor et al., 1992). Due to the under-representation of women and advocates in power roles, change is less likely to occur.

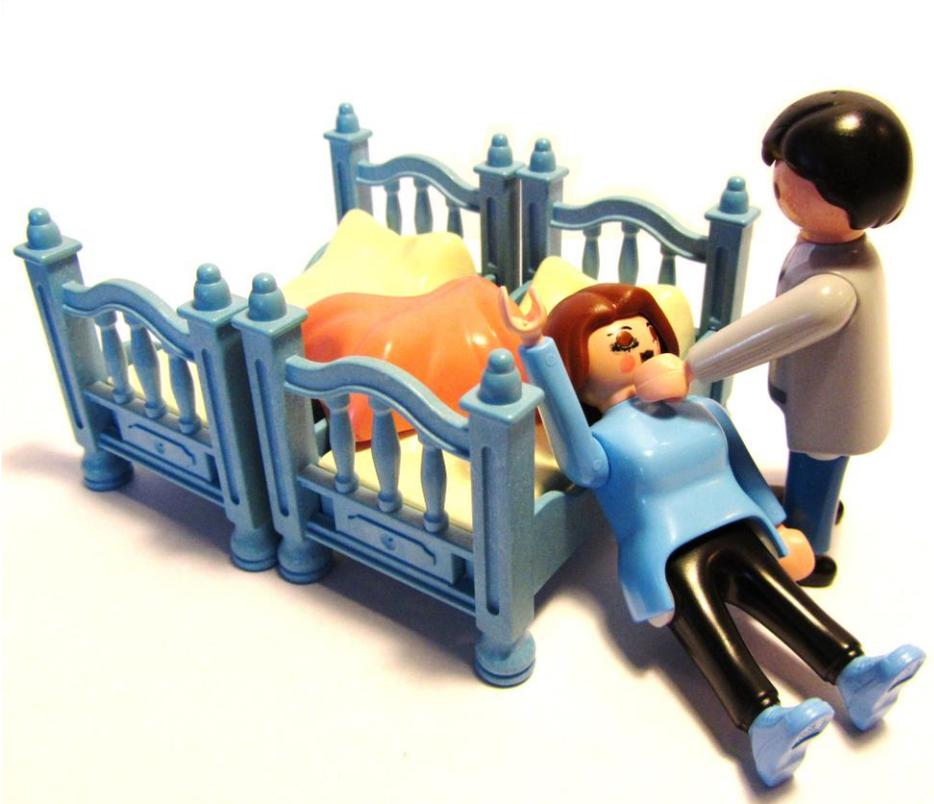
## Table 3 | Stages of Coping

When a woman is coping with abuse, she will typically go through the following four stages:

Stage 1	“It’s my fault.”
Stage 2	“It’s not my fault, but I’ll help you.”
Stage 3	“It’s your fault and I hope you’ll change.”
Stage 4	“Despair.”

(Tutty, 2006, p.379)

Rebecca became upset while reading this. She loved Gary and refused to believe that the abuse was entirely his responsibility. Also, she had nowhere to go and no money of her own; she depended on him for financial support (Health Canada, 2001). How could she support a daughter without her husband's provisions? "Maybe it's not my fault," she thought, "but maybe I can help him change" (Tutty, 2006) (see Table 3, p.9).



One night, Gary went to the bar with his friends and did not return until very late. When he came into the bedroom, he yelled at Rebecca, calling her "useless" and said that he was doing her a favour by staying married to her. He slapped her and threw her onto the bed and forced himself into her. Once the anger had passed, Rebecca called the number on the back of the pamphlet her friend had given her and made an appointment at the women's centre.



The next day, not sure of what to expect, Rebecca made her way to the women's centre. She was terrified, knowing that her husband had threatened to kill her if she told anyone, but she also knew that something needed to be done. She was also very worried about her daughter. Rebecca met a social worker who introduced herself as Julia. Julia was very kind and made Rebecca feel welcome.

After multiple counselling sessions, Rebecca told Julia about the harm she was experiencing at home: physically, emotionally, and sexually. Julia believed that violence was not acceptable and told Rebecca that many other women had also experienced this abuse from their husbands. "I understand," Julia said in response to Rebecca's feelings about the abuse. Julia told Rebecca that she was not alone and that she deserved respect.



## Table 4 | Feminist Intervention

Feminism is a way of thinking, approaching, and analyzing women's and other marginalized groups' socio-economic-political status and situated experiences of oppression within patriarchy. Feminists critique the way societies choose to organize and distribute power, status, privilege, and wealth and analyze how these choices privilege dominant groups and oppress marginalized groups. Feminists also attempt to dismantle systems of dominance and work toward building a society free from violence, exploitation, discrimination, and inequality (Hillock, 2011).

### Feminist Counselling Skills

- Organize office to create a safe environment and celebrate diversity.
- Think about the service user (i.e., the person's history of oppression, his/her gender, race, class, and so on), reflect on own privilege and bias, determine what information and resources may be needed, and acknowledge own limits and fears.
- Build engagement/joining - demonstrate warmth/acceptance, genuine, empathy, and non-judgement.
- Active and reflective listening- help service users to tell their story, organize, and name their experience.
- Minimize power imbalance by paying attention to the power dynamics and inequality in the therapeutic relationship, using first names, demystify the counselling process , and mutually develop counselling goals.
- Validation- let people know that given their story, it makes sense within their socio-political context, that they are having personal struggles.
- Normalization- assist service users to recognize that they are not alone in their specific personal struggles and that many people who share their identity have similar experiences.

#### **Table 4 | Feminist Intervention Continued**

- Depathologize- help service users to externalize the social problem and/or separate it from service user strength and capability.
- Reframe- challenge perceptions of normality and deviance by inviting service users to view their choices, behaviours, and feelings as normal, and often necessary, survival responses to oppression and trauma.
- Introduce hope.
- Self- disclosure- share personal information or a related experience to deepen the quality of the therapeutic relationship, validate and normalize service users' realities, model/offer alternative ways of thinking/acting, and assist service users to fulfill their counselling goals.
- Consciousness raise- assist service users to see how structures in society create and perpetuate inequality, oppression, and personal problems and encourage them to act on this knowledge and awareness by resisting the now visible oppressive structures.
- Group counselling can also be part of a micro intervention for abuse-survivors. Group work can help individuals feel less socially isolated, as well as help them link their personal struggles with public issues (Tutty, 2006).
- Advocate for and with service users
- Collectivization- invite service users, colleagues, friends, family, organizations, and communities to unite people, connect with like-minded progressive organizations, and develop alternative counter-power bases and systems for social change.

(Hillock, 2012)

Julia told Rebecca that her daughter, Nicole, may also be at risk of emotional and physical harm. So, Rebecca agreed to work with Julia to make a Safety Plan. She planned that when an incident was about to occur, she would call her sister who lived nearby and try to get out of the house as soon as possible. If she could not leave, Rebecca would try and get Nicole to safety so she would not have to witness the incident. If Gary became violent, Rebecca would attempt to stay in an open area and away from areas with weapons. When the incident was over, she would contact the women's shelter. Julia told Rebecca that there were six things needed if she needed to leave:

- √ *Money (enough for shelter and phone calls)*
- √ *Keys (for house and car)*
- √ *Extra Clothing (enough for Rebecca and Nicole)*
- √ *Important Documents (social security numbers and birth certificates)*
- √ *Important Phone Number (for police departments, shelters, and friends)*
- √ *Personal Items (medications, Nicole's toys, and jewellery)*

Source: (Berlinger, 1998)

Julia and Rebecca also discussed taking legal action against Gary. Julia said that spousal assault was a criminal offence, and Gary could be charged with domestic violence (Todd & Lundy, 2006). Rebecca still felt uncomfortable involving the police, but kept this option as part of her safety plan. Julia also educated Rebecca on the different community resources, such as nearby shelters, which could be used in case of an emergency. They discussed the root causes of family violence and the power imbalances between women and men that influence relationships.

Rebecca also learned to identify the danger signals in Gary's behaviour so that she could take precautions and ensure her and her daughter's safety (Nichols, 2010). After discussing all this information, Rebecca began to feel that the abuse she was experiencing was not her fault, but Gary's, and she hoped that he would change (Tutty, 2006).

Over time, the abuse that Rebecca experienced at home did not diminish and she feared more and more for her safety. She fell into a state of despair and decided that taking Nicole and leaving Gary was her only choice left (Tutty, 2006).



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Her experiences, desire to have Gary change, and her feelings of despair are consistent with the current research on women's coping with abuse (see Table 3, p.9).

After living with her sister for a few months and working at a local clothing store, Rebecca felt the need to help other women in her community who were struggling just like she had. She became involved with a community support program for other abuse-survivors. They met a couple times a week to go for a walk or have coffee. This provided Rebecca with companionship and support through both the good and bad days.

Julia had mentioned a community program in the schools geared to educating teens about the root causes of family violence. Rebecca felt this program was an important factor in preventing domestic violence and helping others gain the self-esteem needed in healthy relationships.



To help advertise and support this program, Rebecca hung up posters, handed out flyers, and emailed information about the resources available for those silenced women who were being abused emotionally, sexually, or physically by their partners.

After gaining an understanding of the root cause of family violence (see Table 2, p.9), Rebecca began thinking of ways to stop the cycle of family violence in society. She believed that since the problem was primarily an issue of male violence; why not work with the men?

Rebecca brought these ideas to the women's shelter and city council to encourage further discussion on a proposal to stop male violence. One social worker stated that treating men who had been abusers could prevent the abuse of women in their future (Tutty, 2006).



### Table 5 | Interventions for Men

Interventions for men tend to include individual, group, and community approaches.

Individual counselling emphasizes safety planning for women and children, sees men as solely responsible for their violent choices, explores trauma histories, challenges and raises awareness about personal, family, community, and social attitudes that condone violence, teaches alternative non-violent behaviours and communication skills, and recognizes how violence functions to keep women, and other marginalized groups, in subordinate socio-economic positions.

Group counselling with peers can help the male perpetrator take responsibility for his actions and become aware of how he has internalized violent masculinity and rigid gender roles as a norm.

Community intervention includes coordinated prevention, education, and social action strategies to raise awareness about the extent of violence against women and children in our communities, teach non-violent conflict resolution skills, and stop violence.

(Hillock, 2012)

Knowing that she could no longer be silent about all the issues related to domestic violence, Rebecca spent some time researching steps she could take with others at the level of community intervention and social policy to make social change to prevent a the occurrence of family violence:

## **Table 6 | Preventing Family Violence at a Community and Social Policy Level**

### 1 – Examine Existing Policies which Support Patriarchy and Oppress Women

- Capitalism supports the marginalization of certain groups. Explore how capitalistic beliefs support sexism and power imbalances (Todd & Lundy, 2006).
- On average, men earn more than 20% more than female co-workers (QMI Agency, 2010). Resources should be redistributed to increase social equity (Todd & Lundy, 2006).

### 2 – Create More Awareness of the Root Causes of Family Violence

- Challenge patriarchal beliefs “that men have the right to control women’s behaviours” (Tutty, 2006, p.383).
- Russel (1995) discusses “[challenging] the beliefs that give men permission to treat women abusively” (Tutty, 2006, p.383).

### 3 – Implement Educational Programs within Schools and Communities

- Help prevent the occurrence of domestic violence in our society by teaching young teens to learn the warning signs of family violence and how to make healthy choices in relationships (Kelowna Women’s Shelter, 2011).

### 4 – Publicize Issues Surrounding Domestic Violence

- Use flyers, TV commercials, and events to demonstrate the signs the effects of family violence. Advertise the resources available for someone being abused.

### 5 – Create government funded programs for abuse survivors

- This may require a change in the structure of finance (Walby, 2005).
- Counselling services, emergency shelters, medical attention, and legal action are some of the costs of family violence. Revising policy to make way for these costs would provide more services and benefit those involved.

Rebecca had a very interesting journey. Although “battered”, she was able gain support, access necessary resources, receive counselling, make a safety plan, and learn what she needed to know to make the decisions that were right for her and her child. In Rebecca’s case, this meant leaving her abusive relationship. Her journey was not easy but she gained her voice as an abuse-survivor. With this voice and through working with other like minded individuals and groups, she was then able to help others in her community.



The end.

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