

**HOW WOMEN FROM DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SITUATIONS EXPERIENCE
INFORMAL NATURE THERAPY AS PART OF THEIR TRAUMA HEALING
JOURNEY**

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Abstract

This study looked at how women from domestic violence utilize nature in healing and what meanings nature, if any, give to the individuals in these populations. The current treatment available for domestic violence is limited to conventional interventions; such as Eye-Movement-Desensitization and Resourcing, Trauma-Informed transpersonal therapy or temporary shelters. This study sought to understand the lived experiences of four adult women, who have experienced domestic violence and utilized nature in their healing journey. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and analysed using interpretive phenomenological approach. The findings showed three phases of experiences: *Shut In*, *Time for Me* and *The Way It's Supposed to Be*. Nine themes emerged. The themes included negative coping, making the choice to use nature and the ultimate meaning of freedom in healing domestic violence. This research allows future survivors to step forward and participate in a new way of treating trauma or the effects of domestic violence situations.

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Chapter One – Introduction

Domestic violence against women has been an ongoing issue in societies across the world. The experiences of women who have survived domestic violence can be important to understand in order to create preventative measures, as well as to create effective counselling interventions for such populations. Domestic violence can lead to trauma experiences, which can then present through post-traumatic stress disorder in some individuals. This study provides a literature review on the current predominantly used interventions with trauma populations, and explores the use of wilderness therapy in research. Nature as a path to healing has been used for many centuries. Research into specific meanings and impacts of the informal use of nature by individuals who have experienced domestic violence has been limited.

My own journey in nature has given me the curiosity to explore others' experiences using nature in both intentional and explorative ways. I've experienced first-hand the connection, empowerment and meaning that nature can provide in healing. This curiosity has led me to want to explore others perspectives and meaning-making of nature.

As a Counselling Psychology student, my passion for working with those who have had trauma experiences, and my understanding specifically of women coming from abusive relationships, has guided me to combine my passions for nature healing and working with trauma clients. My hope for this research is simply to unfold the lived experiences of these women and present their own meanings from spending time in nature, and the healing that has occurred for them through this. This study is my exploration of understanding how healing from abusive relationships can be done through

utilizing nature practises, in order to potentially enhance the way we can work with various individuals impacted by trauma.

Key Terms of Research

Domestic violence in Canada. Domestic violence in Canada has been presented as incorporating physical and sexual abuse. Six percent of Canadians report physical and/or sexual abuse from domestic partners; of this 6%, most are women (Government of Canada [GC], 2009). Women are more likely than men to seek professional help after incidences of abuse, however, only three in ten actually seek help (GC, 2009). Within that 6% population, less than one-quarter reported to have called the police during such instances of violence. Often times, domestic violence against women can be interpreted as a trauma experience. Trauma experiences have been linked to diagnoses of post-traumatic-stress disorder. Symptoms of such experiences include invasive thoughts, nightmares, anxiety and depression (American Psychological Association [APA], 2014).

Trauma as related to domestic violence. Trauma experiences have been shown to create emotional reactions and at times individuals who have experienced a form of trauma have felt loss of worthiness, value and identity, which can prevent women from moving forward and leaving partners who abuse them. (Tzu, 2014; White, 2004). Furthermore, treatment options for women leaving abuse situations are typically held within similar environmental locations and social settings as their life with the domestic abuse (Russell, 2001). This can further diminish the positive healing journey these women are seeking. For the purpose of this study, nature spaces both within urban environments as well as outside urban environments have been considered, taking into account that the nature of domestic violence can sometimes leave urban individuals with

lack of mobility to leave the city in order to participate in nature healing in more remote or rural areas.

Common interventions to healing trauma. EMDR has been a proven therapeutic intervention for individuals experiencing trauma and is currently the most used method of healing. Non-dual transpersonal psychology is another theoretical framework in healing trauma, which has been built upon by eco-psychology. However, as mentioned, these interventions are conventional approaches typically conducted within urban, office environments or institutional settings, which can be constricting to a person seeking trauma therapy.

Wilderness therapy. Incorporating nature into healing journeys is not a new phenomenon--much work has been done in the use of wilderness programs. Specifically, research has been conducted looking at wilderness therapy programs and the benefits for youth populations (Russell, 2001). More recently, research exploring the benefits of using wilderness programs for women in trauma experiences has been presented (Levine, 1994; Powch, 1994). Wilderness therapy helps aid in enhancing self-concept and physical well-being. It also creates resiliency and coping mechanisms and increases personal and interpersonal skills (Russell, 2001).

Wilderness programs working with sexual assault survivors have shown to be beneficial in creating empowerment for women, and the risk and fear involved in completing wilderness challenges have shown to create self-confidence in this population (Levine, 1994). However, most wilderness programs occur in group settings and incorporate a lot of structure and challenges (Levine, 1994; Russell, 2001). This structure and challenging using risk and fear may be beneficial to some, however, it may also re-

traumatize certain individuals. Wilderness therapies may overlook the simple healing aspect of nature (Levine, 1994). Nature on its own can be a healing place for deep personal reflection and work.

Nature therapy. Informal nature therapies have been around for centuries, as a process for transformative and healing work (Berger, & McLeod, 2006). Experiences in nature have been found to be beneficial in creating positive changes to mental, emotional and physical health (Marselle, Irvine, & Warber, 2014). Incorporating nature into the counselling process whether with guidance of a therapist or in personal healing, can aid in the overall well-being and happiness of healing trauma (Louv, 2011; Roszak, 2001).

While there are some theoretical and empirical research studies in academia in regards to wilderness therapy and informal nature therapies, there is little qualitative data on the experiences of women from domestic violence situations healing their trauma through the use of nature. Nature is not a complete replacement of professional therapy, however, it can be an influential aspect in cultivating or sustaining mental health (Louv, 2011).

Many people use nature in informal ways for the benefits it provides, however, there is little known about the experiences of various populations and individuals in using nature for trauma healing. More specifically, nature can be a positive tool for women experiencing trauma (Berger, & McLeod, 2006; Poole, Greaves, Jategaonker, McCullough, & Chabot, 2008) yet there is little academic qualitative research which seeks to gain the understanding of how women with trauma view nature therapy. Furthermore, there is little knowledge about how this population experiences nature healing in comparison to conventional or alternative forms of treatment for trauma.

Purposes and Questions in This Research

This research sought insight into the questions (a) How do women in domestic violence situations experience nature therapy, and (b) What are the meanings attached (if any) from these experiences?

Purposes for looking into these lived experiences are personal and professional. As an avid outdoor enthusiast I have personally experienced positive effects of spending time in nature as a self-care technique both in regards to enjoyment and unwinding stress. Experiencing these positive effects on mental, physical and emotional health have created an interest in understanding how others may use and perceive nature in the healing process. As a counsellor in training, I also wanted to understand how nature therapy or nature in general can be better utilized in the counseling process and what the benefits are to clients in a clinical setting. Counselling while incorporating nature in informal ways can have added benefits to women in trauma situations and it is an important area to gain insight in. Whether in guided or unguided ways, nature can have transformative effects within this population. Gaining the understanding of how this occurs was important to me on a professional level.

As a researcher, the thick, rich descriptions of personal experiences of nature in healing, as guided by the qualitative method are of particular interest. By sharing the lived experiences of women who have experienced domestic violence using nature as part of their healing, there can be an increase in understanding of how to incorporate these practises into the counselling interventions used today. Providing a voice through critical hermeneutic methods, also empowers these individuals to help further the field of

counselling and the academic world by providing critical descriptions from a marginalized and under-heard population.

Significance and Implications

The significance and implications of this research include the opportunity to create future treatment opportunities using or incorporating nature for the population of women who have experienced trauma. This research could have clinical significance in shaping the way counselling is provided for individuals experiencing trauma through domestic violence and the ways in which clinicians work with survivors. As well, there will be added benefits to other women who have experienced domestic violence and trauma, in knowing they are not alone, and there are alternative ways of healing trauma in addition or as an alternative to temporary shelters and conventional therapeutic healing interventions.

In beginning to shape this research, a thorough literature review is presented in relation to the key terms of this research, methodology and methods used for this research are discussed and researcher assumptions and biases are noted. It is important to review the literature of this population and the conventional treatments available to the trauma populations. Defining and evaluating wilderness programs creates a stepping stone of benefits and limitations of incorporating nature into therapy. Finally, reviewing literature on informal nature therapies can aid in understanding the phenomenon thus far and create a start to further research needed in this area.

Chapter Two - Literature Review

In reviewing the literature, definitions of what the populations of women in domestic violence situations look like and the current available treatment methods for the trauma journey are examined. A look at the history and effective practises of wilderness therapy, with limitations to this formalized approach are discussed. Literature explaining nature therapy roots, practise and implications are presented. Finally, the implications of such therapies with women who have experienced domestic violence are reviewed.

Women in Domestic Violence Situations

There are many types of violence in today's society and one of the most prevalent yet under-reported types of violence are that of intimate partner or domestic violence (GC, 2009), which may be characterized by emotional, physical, sexual and psychological abuse of a person (United Nations [UN], 1993). There have been many definitions of these experiences, especially related to women who are being abused, and in such there have been many treatment methods for women who are trying to leave their abusers (Clevenger, & Roe-Sepowitz, 2009), recover from concurrent substance use or misuse (Poole, et al., 2008), and begin their healing journey of their trauma experiences (White, 2004). The current available treatment approaches to the healing trauma journey after domestic violence, are often limited to temporary shelters (Clevenger, & Roe-Sepowitz, 2009), and focus on substance use (Poole, et al., 2008). Further, these are offered in the same geographic locations as the women's abusers and past lives were lived (Clevenger, & Roe-Sepowitz, 2009; Edmond, Rubin, & Wambach, 1999; Poole, et al., 2008; Rothbaum, Astin, & Marsteller, 2005). Coming to a clear definition of what domestic violence for women looks like, and the effective treatment methods available, is

important in uncovering the next steps to help the individuals in these populations in healing their trauma.

Definition. The United Nations defines violence against women as any act of gender-based violence that can result in sexual, physical, psychological or sexual harm to women, including threats or coercion and can occur in public or private (UN, 1993). The violence can include; physical, sexual, emotional, financial, spiritual or criminal abuse. Each type of abuse varies in definition. Physical abuse includes using hands or objects as weapons and sexual abuse includes using threats, intimidation or physical force to perform unconsented sexual acts. Emotional abuse relates to threats of death, humiliation, degrading comments, isolation, restrictions or other acts limiting a person's freedom and independence. Financial abuse involves stealing or controlling money or valuables, or restricting the ability to work. Using religious or spiritual beliefs to control is considered spiritual abuse. Finally, criminal abuse involves stalking; following and watching in a malicious way, and invading privacy which can be threatening to personal safety (UN, 1993).

In 2009, the General Social Survey was conducted through a self-report method and found that 6% of Canadians reported physical and/or sexual violence between spouses or dating partners (GC, 2009). This study mentioned emotional and financial abuse of spouses within its 2004 study, however, it did not look at these types of abuses in depth, or follow up on these cases in the 2009 follow up study (GC, 2009). Women were found to be three times more likely to be killed by a partner than men in domestic violent incidents (GC, 2009).

As a self-reported survey, it is common to under-report or misreport occurrences of such vulnerable issues. The survey collected information on why people do not report domestic violence, and the top reason given (82%) was that victims believed it was a personal issue that did not need police involvement. Others believed the incident was not important enough to report (70%).

Following that, the study looked at the number of victims that choose to seek formal and informal support. It found that women were more likely than men to seek informal support through family, friends and neighbours. The study states three in ten women sought professional services such as therapists, psychologists etc. for help, which seems like a low percentage seeking help. Less women sought professional help in 2009 (22%), than they did in 2004 (28%), stating that the issues were too minor or they did not need help as reasons to not seek services (GC, 2004, 2009).

One study conducted explored the reasons behind seeking help or not seeking help following domestic violence experiences of women. This qualitative study interviewed sixteen women and found that the women's experiences of speaking to health care professionals regarding domestic violence were not helpful (Bacchus, Mezey, & Bewley, 2003). For most of the women, the brevity of appointments, uncertainty of confidentiality and attitudes of health care professionals played the biggest role in dissuading them from reaching out for further help. This study found that professionals would need more specific training and skills within domestic violence in order to be more helpful to survivors of such abuse (Bacchus, Mezey, & Bewley, 2003).

Having more specific training in domestic violence could be helpful in providing support to survivors, which yet another study found; though also linked the interventions

women received following domestic violence to be focused on the physical effects and having lack of support in emotional ways. Humphreys, and Thiara (2003) conducted a mixed method study, where a sample of 180 questionnaires were completed and 20 interviews conducted from women who had experienced domestic violence and their experiences of seeking help through outreach and professional services. This study found that in seeking help for domestic violence, firstly the participants felt their sense of safety was not important to professionals and they were unable to be referred to address safety needs in leaving their partners (Humphreys, & Thiara, 2003).

Another important theme arose in that the participants felt they were being stigmatized by their family and community for attending mental health support, which other further increased the feelings of low self-esteem that the domestic violence made them feel.

In turn, the participants felt that interventions that focused on labeling the trauma they had experienced, and providing support for safety and emotional healing was more helpful to them and aided them in further seeking help and leaving abusive partners. They also noted that having specialized treatment in the area of trauma was important as they felt the person helping them was supportive and could understand their situation (Humphreys, & Thiara, 2003).

This study looked at ethnic minority participants, as there has been a need to understand different cultural and ethnic experiences with domestic violence and seeking help. The study concluded that due to the strong emotional effect on women experiencing domestic violence, interventions for such populations need to be more effective and sensitive to the direct implications of such abuse on the well-being of individuals (Humphreys, & Thiara, 2003). Creating more appropriate methods of treatment and

support for these populations is important as domestic violence can affect many individuals, no matter the background.

Domestic violence against women is not subject to ethnic, religious or cultural barriers as it affects those from all backgrounds, income levels, education, religion, ethnicity and culture. However, younger women are more at risk to be victims of domestic violence than other age categories as well as Aboriginal women more at risk than other ethnic backgrounds (GC, 2009). In Canada, the last survey to be completed on women's life experience with violence was conducted in 1993. No new statistics in this area are presented by the government.

Though the literature shows interchangeable use of the terms intimate partner violence and domestic violence (Bacchus, Mezey, & Bewley, 2003; Humphreys, & Thiara, 2003; Janssen, Dascal-Wiechhendler, & McGregor, 2005; Reisenhofer, & Taft, 2013; Roddy, 2015) for the purpose of consistency in this research, the term domestic violence will be used.

Trauma. Trauma, as defined by the American Psychological Association (2014), is the emotional reaction or response after a terrible event such as a rape, accident or disaster. Following the event, responses such as shock and denial are usual. Long term effects can include unpredictable emotions, physical symptoms, and flashbacks (APA, 2014). Severe reactions to trauma events can lead to a diagnosis or experience of symptoms included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders – Version Five (DSM-5) of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD, as presented in the DSM-5, identifies triggers as “exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violation.” (APA, 2014, p. 272).

It continues to outline scenarios in which the exposure resulted from including: directly experiencing a trauma situation, witnessing a trauma in person, learning of trauma occurring to a close family member or friend, or experiencing repeated exposure to details of trauma events (not through media). The effects cause clinically significant distress in the person's social interactions, ability to work or other important functioning areas and is not the result of other medical conditions or use of drugs or alcohol (APA, 2014).

In those definitions, it is clear that women experiencing abuse in domestic violence fit the category as being individuals who experience trauma, and in turn, may develop PTSD. It is important to know, however, that not all individuals experiencing domestic violence develop PTSD, and furthermore, not all individuals experiencing domestic violence feel that their relationships are trauma. In this research, the terms trauma and PTSD are used as needed by each co-researcher's self-identification with the terms.

White (2004) discusses the idea that people who experience trauma can experience the effects of losing touch with a sense of who they are, as well as their value and worthiness as a person, thus invalidating their reason for living. They can lose touch with their own identities (Tzu, 2014; White, 2004). This in turn, can result in an inability to move on with their lives, and an inability to respond to their life circumstances with 'personal agency' (White, 2004).

Other studies have also found that domestic violence and the control they endured at the hands of their partners, have a strong effect on women's perceptions and beliefs about themselves as well as implications of their sense of safety and freedom

(Humphreys, & Thiara, 2003; Cascardi, 1999 as cited in Humphreys, & Thiara, 2003).

Women who experience trauma through domestic abuse may have a difficult time in the ability or desire to move on, especially due to the physical and social reminders of their abuse, which can be presented in their surroundings (White, 2004).

Many treatment approaches to women from domestic violence situations, are tailored to working with trauma, in the same surroundings the abuse occurred (same urban area, neighbourhood, etc.) which may in turn lead to difficulty for the woman to move on from the relationship due to having reminders in her geographic environment (White, 2004).

Treatment Interventions

In examining the literature regarding counselling approaches and interventions for individuals impacted by domestic violence, it became clear that approaches tend to fall under the umbrella of temporary shelter services, or trauma-specific approaches.

Through reviewing several studies on various interventions used with domestic violence and trauma populations, it has been said that specialized trauma therapy is needed for those who have experienced abuse (Edmond, Rubin, & Wambach, 1999). In reviewing the current research with domestic violence populations, several studies noted that participants felt having professionals who has particular skills and training with trauma would be helpful to their experiences in seeking help (Bacchus, Mezey, & Bewley, 2003; Humphreys, & Thiara, 2003).

Though training and trauma-informed skills are helpful to populations who have experienced domestic violence, and professionals should be well prepared to aid in supporting a survivor of abuse, specifically specialized trauma therapists are not the only

method to receiving support and increasing one's well-being (Edmond, Rubin & Wambach, 1999).

Temporary shelters. Much of the support available to women who are experiencing domestic violence is found through temporary shelters (Clevenger, & Roe-Sepowitz, 2009). Several quantitative and mixed method studies have been conducted, showing the ways in which women from domestic violence situations utilize shelters, and the connections between shelter use, domestic violence survivors and substance use. A mixed-method study conducted by Poole, Greaves, Jategaonker, McCullough and Chabot (2008) sought to find the relationships between women in domestic violence situations accessing temporary shelters while using substances/alcohol as they determined a need for more integrative services for this particular population. The 125 study participants from across 13 temporary shelters, who were using substances and fleeing violent situations, were interviewed twice; once while in the shelter and a second time as follow up, three months after leaving shelter.

The results of the standardized measures (Brief Michigan Alcohol Screening Test, Index of Spouse Abuse, Stressors Questionnaire and the Timeline Follow back Calendar), and qualitative interview data showed that participant relationship stress decreased while accessing the shelter. However, complicated relationships between violence, substances and stressors appeared as psychosocial stressors, relational stressors and structural stressors.

Further, these findings showed that women decreased their use of substance following staying at a shelter and improved in their health, income, and housing situations as influenced by social and structural factors (Poole, et al, 2008). The study

shows that while the use of temporary shelters is helpful, and creates some positive change, more needs to be done to explore the social and structural factors associated with women leaving domestic violence situations and using substances. It would have been beneficial to do a more extensive follow up to determine if the observations discussed were maintained past the three month follow-up. The study does outline the importance of support in shelters on various life issues associated with this population and contributes to the mindset that harm reduction is a positive change influencer.

This study determines that there need to be more collaborative approaches between substance treatment, domestic violence services and other various women's services. The greatest limitation noted by this study was the lack of participation due to women going back to be with their abusive partners.

The temporary nature of most women's shelters, a primary source of support for victims of domestic violence, presents a limitation to this form of intervention. Another study determined a need for more research specifically in regards to domestic violence and shelter utilization, as most literature focuses on homelessness, mental illness, child abuse and sexual assault (Clevenger, & Roe-Sepowitz, 2009). The study focuses on domestic violence victims in crisis situations and their reasons for using or not using shelter services in order to escape their situations (Clevenger, & Roe-Sepowitz, 2009). The study included 265 female and 18 male victims of domestic violence aged 11-76. The Client Encounter form was used as the instrument in this study addressing demographic information, client's support system and whether they contacted the support system. The forms were then analysed using statistical software (Clevenger, & Roe-Sepowitz, 2009).

The study found that victims who had children, were calling for assistance outside of the location where the incident occurred, or did not have an order of protection, were more likely to utilize a shelter (Clevenger, & Roe-Sepowitz, 2009). Of these findings, it seems clear that fear, escape and need for safety were common themes. Those who have experienced domestic violence, were fearful for their children, escaping or fleeing the home in search of safety and by not having an order of protection, individuals needed to access emergency shelters.

In looking at the results of this study, it can be said that the importance for those experiencing domestic violence to leave the area where the violence occurred, or 'get away from' the partner who abused them is significant to the individual. The study suggests further research on domestic violence victims and their cultural, spiritual and religious beliefs. The study also suggests research including more detail of individual motives for using or not using shelters.

Many studies show that emergency shelters provide support and an opportunity to regain independence following domestic violence, yet most women do not stay at shelters for long (Clevenger, & Roe-Sepowitz, 2009; Fish, & Stylianou, 2016; Poole, et al., 2008). One study pointed to the fact that again, contextual factors, partner factors and shelters specifically were the main reasons women did not feel comfortable remaining in shelters for a long duration (Fisher, & Stylianou, 2016). Therefore, it can be determined that although these quantitative and mixed method studies were important, more qualitative work is needed to determine individual experiences of motivation in seeking treatments.

Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR). EMDR was developed in 1987 by Francine Shapiro who noticed that after a few rapid eye movements, troubling experiences in her life were less concerning (Shapiro, 2001). In using EMDR, a therapist will move their finger in front of a client from side to side, as the client watches the finger, they are encouraged to visualize a memory in relation to their trauma and allow the emotions to come through. EMDR is one of the most used and researched methods in working with trauma.

A randomized experimental study conducted with 59 women who survived childhood sexual abuse found evidence to support the effectiveness of EMDR within sexual abuse populations (Edmond, et al., 1999). The study randomly assigned the women to one of three groups; receiving EMDR treatment, receiving routine individual treatment or delayed treatment control group. Through statistical analysis of standardized measures such as the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, the Impact of Events Scale, Beck Depression Inventory and the Belief Inventory, the results showed the EMDR group of women scored significantly better than controls both at the post-test and the three month follow up (Edmond, et al, 1999).

These results determined a general effectiveness of EMDR in reducing trauma symptoms. However, there was a lack of significant difference between the EMDR group and the individual treatment group (Edmond, et al., 1999). Although this study was able to show a general effectiveness of EMDR treatment, the subjective and personal experiences of the participants were not discussed within the use of EMDR.

A controlled study evaluating prolonged exposure and EMDR in relation to PTSD rape victims found improvement in PTSD symptoms when compared with a delayed

treatment group (Rothbaum, et al., 2005). This study, however, found no significant difference between prolonged exposure and EMDR treatments. Prolonged exposure is a technique relating to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) which has been found to be another effective treatment for PTSD (Foa, Friedman, & Keane, 2000 as cited in Rothbaum, et al., 2005). This particular study included 74 adult female rape victims in a prolonged exposure, EMDR and control group.

Standardized measures included both interview forms and self-report. The interview measures included; clinician-administered PTSD scale, The Assault Information Interview and The Stressful Life Events Screening. Self-report measures included; The PTSD Symptom Scale, The Beck Depression Inventory, The Dissociative Experiences Scale II and the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (Rothbaum, et al., 2005). The results of the study showed both prolonged exposure and EMDR to lead to improvements following treatment and at the 6 month follow up as compared to the control group (Rothbaum, et al., 2005).

It is evident that EMDR is an effective treatment method for reducing symptoms associated with trauma and PTSD, including female survivors of sexual abuse. However, most studies using this treatment method focus on the measurable qualities of the treatment rather than the lived experiences of the participants. As well, EMDR may be beneficial for many people who have experienced trauma, but it can also be argued, due to the similar environment and conventional therapy approaches, this model may not be beneficial for all individuals.

Transpersonal approach to trauma. Non-dual approaches in therapy are a means of combining Western and Eastern philosophies and theories into one.

Transpersonal, non-dual therapy uses various developmental models of consciousness to work through splits of identity to achieve wholeness within the being and connection to the universe. This research is not focused on non-duality but recognizes the effectiveness of such an approach in combination with nature therapy. Works by Almaas, (1996); Nelson, (1994); Nixon, (2012); Tzu, (2014); and Wilber, (2000), present a thorough and integrative look at transpersonal psychology and the non-dual approach. For the purpose of this review, only an analysis of non-dual approach in terms of trauma is presented.

Transpersonal psychology is an attempt at bringing all human experience into the window of psychology; it includes a variety of psychological interventions and approaches so as not to limit the human experience, and adds in concepts of consciousness, psychology and spirituality (Davis, 1998). Within the transpersonal non-dual approach to trauma, trauma is viewed as a fuel for addictive cycles, and the underlying core issues—those feelings of worthlessness and lost identity—are what need to be worked through to prevent further trauma and addiction (Tzu, 2014). The first step of the healing journey is telling the story within a safe environment, the client describes the trauma event while the therapist holds the space in a safe and healing way (Nixon, 2013). The next step is to notice the judging voice; typically in trauma events, it isn't the trauma itself, but rather our own judgements of the trauma that cause the splits in identity, such as “this is awful, the worst thing to ever happen” and then let go of that criticism (Nixon, 2013).

Following, the client re-lives the trauma experience without judgement of the experience. Clients may need to role play or act out the trauma in some way as the process happens (Tzu, 2014). During this acting out process, clients are able to freely

express and spontaneously act out the physical as it arises (Tzu, 2014). Next, client reclaims their identity as the therapist helps the client to see that the trauma did not take away their whole identity. Finally, therapist and client debrief and make connections to the whole experience. The therapist gives permission to client to let go of the trauma; allowing them to feel that the trauma does not hold their identity (Tzu, 2014).

There is very little literature on empirical studies using the non-dual transpersonal approach. Current literature on this method of trauma work is limited to self-analysis and clinical narrative case studies.

In one self-analysis style article, reflecting on the transpersonal approach following a physical injury, the use of self-awareness and therapeutic insight is described during the re-integration processes (Guest, 1995). This article was presented in narrative case study form including reflective field-notes. In discussion of the process, two levels of consciousness were found interplaying between the ego and observer. The narrative describes the process of pathological symptoms that may appear following a trauma; including false association.

The false association is what is prevented through re-living the trauma with a therapist or by writing a detailed account of the incident, in order to prevent a lack of recall (Guest, 1995). Following, the description of the “second trauma” is presented, in which a person feels emotions of hurt, anger, being let down, etc. By allowing those emotions to be expressed, and surrendering to them, connections to the unconscious of the trauma may come forth. In surrendering to the emotions that arose, the author found a place to reintegrate her experiences in a new way (Guest, 1995). Debriefing occurred in order to deal with any inappropriate associations formed in the process.

Although this process works for many individuals on the healing journey of trauma, trans-personal psychology is a second and third stage recovery model that isn't fit for everyone. The approach may be too abstract and not structured or have enough techniques for some individuals in processing their trauma, in which case, other methods, such as EMDR, would be more beneficial. In other cases, conventional treatments may be too close to home and a separation from the environment may be beneficial to individuals.

Transpersonal psychology has strong tenants to eco-psychology which may be beneficial to overview for the purposes of this research.

Eco Psychology

Eco psychology is founded in the belief that the human and natural world have a symbiotic and reciprocal relationship (Davis, 1998). Eco psychologists believe there is a deep bond between humans and the physical world, which if realized, can provide healing for both, while if unrealized, can lead to negative effects on both (Davis, 1998). The connection between transpersonal theory and eco psychology lies in the understandings of spirituality, consciousness and connection (Davis, 1998). Though there may be similarities, there is uncertainty regarding combining the two approaches (Reser, 1995).

Ken Wilber, in one of his works, *Sex, Ecology and Spirituality* (1995), discusses nature as presenting invitations to let go of egoic grasping and providing people with benefits to psychological health and opportunity for transformation (Wilber, 1995). He also notes a difference between being a part of nature and being *nature*, where the first is only a connection to the physical environment and the second as a sense of wholeness (Wilber, 1995).

Eco psychology is built on the foundation of non-duality between humans and nature. Connecting wholly to nature is when opportunity for transformation, spiritual understanding and connection comes from. More works regarding eco psychology and non-duality can be found in the references of this research (Davis, 1998; Greenway, 1995; Wilber, 1995; Winter, 1996).

Wilderness Therapy

In the literature, there has been a lot of confusion of what “wilderness” therapy is characterized by and many writers have reviewed historical references to wilderness therapy to come to a more integrated definition (Levine, 1994; Russell, 2001, 2009; Roszak, 2001). Throughout history, wilderness therapy has been interchangeably discussed with adventure therapy, challenge courses, wilderness experience programs and boot camps (Russell, 2001). All the above can vary in characterization in many ways. One notion that separates wilderness therapy from the other types of outdoor therapy is that wilderness therapy has the added benefit of actual therapy processes as part of the experience. However, with no clear definition of what wilderness therapy entails, programs emerging in diverse fields have no way of creating standardized programs using key design features, thus there is a need for an integrated definition of what this therapy approach entails (Russell, 2001).

Definition. Russell (2001), explores the various definitions of “wilderness” therapy in a historical context and proposes an integrated psychologically-informed definition to use in future programs associated with wilderness which combines various aspects presented in wilderness therapy throughout history. Wilderness experience programs, a broader term, has been defined as “organizations that conduct outdoor

programs in wilderness for purposes of personal growth, therapy, rehabilitation, education and/or leadership development” (Friese, Hende, & Kinziger, 1998). Many definitions exist regarding wilderness therapy created by researchers, clinicians and psychologists (Russell, 2001). Due to the interchangeability of terms in the field, and the negative connotations regarding ‘boot camps’ (Russell, 2001), some say there needs to be a more integrative way of looking at all the terms. Powch (1994) believes it is more correct to use the terms concurrently in that an obstacle course may be a part of a ‘challenge course’ which may be a component of ‘adventure therapy’ which is a part of wilderness therapy, and in turn wilderness therapy is occurring in nature with therapy in mind. Looking at the history and development of what wilderness therapy is or has been, is important in determining the usefulness and effectiveness of the qualities of wilderness therapy in working with various populations, including women with trauma experiences.

The concept of wilderness therapy began with the Outward Bound movement in 1942, where it was used to help British sailors handle the rough seas. The program was developed by Kurt Hahn in the 1920s as an experiential learning experience (Powch, 1994). The United States began using the Outward Bound program with various populations in 1962 (Powch, 1994). In 1993, wilderness therapy was defined as having a group process, a set of challenges, employing therapeutic techniques and was at a varied length of time. At this time, a licenced staff was not required (Kimball, & Bacon, 1993). Details were added to the definition of these programs as time went on. Components of the therapy included confronting fear, experiencing trust in group, immediacy, feedback, more careful selection of participants, individual treatment plans for participants, involvement in outdoor adventure pursuits, activities in creating change and group

psychotherapy. Not all staff were licensed, but mental health supervisors and managers of clinical components were encouraged to have specific training (Davis-Berman, & Berman, 1994; Powch, 1994). In 1997, more details were established regarding format; the idea of a base camp with little or no equipment and isolated environment and expeditions became more conformative in the wilderness therapy process (Crisp, 1997).

Through the various studies conducted, a more integrated definition of what wilderness therapy consists of has emerged. That integrated definition focuses on the theoretical basis in that wilderness therapy is therapeutically based, with emphasis on family systems models and cognitive behavioural treatment which create a positive but intense experience in processing emotions (Bandorodd, & Scherer, 1994). The staff are less authoritative and more empathetic and caring (Powch, 1994; Russell, 2001), which creates a space to allow the natural environment to influence the clients in their responses. Wilderness therapy uses adventure and activities to create growth (Kimball, & Bacon, 1993) and expeditions (Crisp, 1998) in creating change for clients.

Wilderness therapy aims to address the presenting concerns of clients through removing them from their familiar environments which may have influenced their destructive behaviours and working on self-care, nutrition and physical activity (Kimball, & Bacon, 1993). Even with this idea of an unfamiliar environment, some researchers insist that therapy can take place in any environment that is unfamiliar to the client, and still be called wilderness therapy (Kimball, & Bacon, 1993). However, the belief that wilderness therapy must take place in a wilderness setting, not just an unfamiliar setting, has more of an argument (Powch, 1994).

Being removed from the familiar environment, or put into the wilderness, then, group interaction allows clients to learn responsibility as interaction in the wilderness setting is key to maintaining safety and comfort (Russell, 2001). Expected outcomes from wilderness therapy are an enhanced self-concept, physical well-being, sense of empowerment and resiliency, increased personal and interpersonal skills, coping skills, understanding of past behaviour and change process, and a different perspective on their personal issues (Russell, 2001). It is important to note that although there have been expected outcomes listed above, those expected outcomes are not likely to always be true for all participants of wilderness therapy. The experience may change depending on the characteristics and level of readiness for change in each individual participant.

Effectiveness. Many studies with wilderness therapy have focused on the experiences of youth and adolescents as participants (Bettmann, Russell, & Kimber, 2013; Magle-Haberek, et al., 2012; Russell, 2000; Russell, & Phillips-Miller, 2002). In one study conducted by Russell and Phillips-Miller (2002), they examined the benefits of wilderness therapy with 12 adolescent clients (aged 13-17) in a multisite case study method. The researchers observed seven to ten days in the field, ingraining themselves as a member of the group (Russell, & Phillips-Miller, 2002). Clients, parents and counsellors were interviewed following treatment using unstructured interviews. Open and pattern consistent qualitative coding was used to analyse the data collected and maintain reliability. Their study determined the reason of clients entering wilderness therapy was due to school problems and resistance to other types of counselling. The study also determined that wilderness therapy helped create change through relationships

with counselors, peers, reflection of life through use of solos and the challenge/structure of the program (Russell, & Phillips-Miller, 2002).

The use of solos—several days alone in the wilderness completing various activities, with only daily staff safety checks—has been mentioned in many studies as a “rite of passage” (Russell, & Phillips-Miller, 2002; Russell, 2000). This process allows for clients to interact with nature on their own, and achieve a new perspective on their lives. Clients in Russell and Phillips-Miller (2002) study commented that the solo experiences were a key experience of the wilderness therapy. However, a majority of the benefits noted by this study and others like it (Bandoroff, & Scherer, 1994; Bettmann, et al., 2013; Magle-Haberek, et al., 2012; Russell, 2000), are related to delinquency in youth. The benefits of “changing attitudes/behaviours, appreciating parents, abstaining from drugs/alcohol and being a better person” (Russell, & Phillips-Miller, 2002), are not applicable in using wilderness therapy with other populations.

In 1994, a study was conducted by Levine, with sexual assault survivors in wilderness therapy. The study determined group leader’s responsibility is to help the women understand their trauma experiences, set up appropriate risk and induce a ‘safe’ amount of fear. The women complete challenges that may have elicited feelings similar to those experienced during their trauma, but in relation to something they can overcome and accomplish (scaling a mountain, hiking a difficult trail) (Levine, 1994). These challenges, and overcoming them, increase the self-confidence of this population according to Levine. However, although some women may feel empowered by completing these challenges, for others, the risk taking and fear, re-experiencing the

emotions of the trauma, without appropriate set up/de-briefing, may only re-traumatize them.

Although wilderness therapy programs have their benefits, some would argue that wilderness therapy, in its rigid structure and “challenge” aspect, overlooks the value of informal experiences in nature. It has been said that wilderness therapy does not put emphasis on the emotional, spiritual and connection aspects of what nature can provide in healing (Berger, & McLeod, 2006) but it rather creates nature to be a space of challenges and completing risk-tasks.

Limitations. One major downfall to wilderness experience programs is they are structured and focused on group work, typically within the adolescent population (Russell, 2000; Russell, 2001; Magle-Haberek, et al., 2012). The wilderness therapy approached with women, have also discussed the marginalization and emotional safety for women. It has been mentioned in the literature, that wilderness may be presented as an ‘unsafe’ place for women; with the fear of rape around every turn in the trail. A woman’s history with wilderness experiences in and with their family, friends or childhood may shape the way they feel about experiencing nature now (Powch, 1994). As well, there is limited information on women of various ethnicities, cultures and races experiencing wilderness therapy.

Domestic violence affects women of all backgrounds, yet the literature rarely shows the experiences of understandings of women from various cultural backgrounds in wilderness therapy. There is very little literature on the effects of more informal nature therapy approaches, and even less so in terms of working on the trauma healing of women from domestic violence situations.

Informal Nature Therapy

Due to the rigid structure of wilderness experience programs, more work with informal nature settings can be done to create some of the positive effects of what wilderness therapy provides without the structure, group work or “work” feel of wilderness programs. Some progress has been made in terms of incorporating nature settings and nature activities in an informal manner to aid in positive effects for stress, anxiety, depression, and even in trauma situations. Defining what informal nature therapies look like and implications of these ideas are important in guiding our research into working with women in domestic violent situations.

Definition. Nature therapy is not a new notion in society; it stems back centuries to when people lived with nature in their communities: shamans would use nature’s healing in rituals and traditional medicine, which were types of therapy (West, 2004). As time went on and modern therapy was developing, Erickson, who was one of Freud’s students, began to use experiential encounters with nature in the healing of himself and his clients; sending them up mountains as part of their therapy (Kinder, 2002). Many writers at this point have shown that the separation in recent years of humans from their surrounding natural environment has led to and contributed to decreased well-being, emotional problems and poor health (Greenway, 1995; Louv, 2011; Roszac, 2001) so far as to have created a term ‘nature –deficit disorder’ (Louv, 2011, p. 15).

Eco-psychology is an emerging field that discusses the “social-therapeutic-environmental philosophy” in suggesting that connection with nature is not only good for the physical environment but for human well-being and happiness (Louv, 2011 p. 13; Roszac, 2001). Many writers and researchers believe that nature has transformative

powers (Davis, 1998; Greenway, 1995; Louv, 2011; Roszac, 2001; Wilber, 1995; Winter, 1996). Louve (2011) discusses seven precepts of the power of nature, among which he talks about how the more involved in technology we become, the more nature we need in order to achieve ‘natural balance.’

In therapy, nature-informed approaches are beginning to be noticed as specific models of therapy known as ‘nature therapy’ (Berger, 2005). Nature therapy includes various dimensions and integrates the use of art therapy, Gestalt, narrative, eco-psychology, transpersonal psychology, adventure therapy, shamanism and body-mind practises (Berger, & McLeod, 2006). Nature is seen as a therapeutic setting as it is an independent and open area which existed prior to and will exist after humans leave (Berger, 2005). Nature therapy is based on the idea that a physical journey in nature can connect to a similar psychological and spiritual journey; in that every element of nature can invite clients to look at inner processes, this can allow a connection between body, spirit and mind (Lahad as cited in Berger, & McLeod, 2006). The therapist who uses nature therapy may develop the therapeutic relationship as either working with the client in a nature setting, or have the client work with nature while the therapist is a witness to the process that occurs (Berger, & McLeod, 2006).

Effectiveness. In looking at the research that uses more informal nature therapy models, we can see the mental health benefits to participating within such programs or experiences. Outdoor walking groups, for example, have been shown to facilitate social interaction, physical activity and interaction with nature. A longitudinal quantitative study was recently conducted in England, as the mental health benefits of outdoor walks were not clearly known (Marselle, Irvine, & Warber, 2014). This study looked at the

mental, emotional and social well-being of 1,516 individuals who were statistically matched using propensity scoring, in a comparison group of those who participated in walking and those who did not. The study concluded that those who participated in nature walks in groups had lower depression, stress and negative affect, as well as had increased positive affect and mental health. The group nature walks also helped with the effects of stress in life. There was no difference in social well-being between the two groups.

It is suggested that people are more likely to participate in nature walks with a companion of sorts (Ball, Bauman, Leslie, & Owen, 2001) and actually enjoy walking more so when they have someone to walk with (Plante, Gores, Brecht, Carrow, Imbs, & Willemssen, as cited in Marselle, et al., 2014). Ball, Bauman, Leslie and Owen (2001) examined the relationship between aesthetics of environment, walking companions and use of recreation through nature in gender differences and physical and mental health. This cross-sectional self-report study gathered information through a survey of 3,392 adults. It was concluded that walking companions and environmental aesthetics were important for adults to walk in nature for recreation, more so for women than men.

However, the group walking study (Marselle, et al, 2014) showed no difference in social wellbeing for those who did the group walks. This study suggests further research into the differences between walking alone versus in groups. The study also suggests more research into what frequency of walking begins to show positive mental health effects. Through this study it is also suggested that more research into whether type and quality of the nature environment impacts mental health as well as showed a need for more qualitative work to determine individual experiences of nature walks in terms of

individual attachment, past experiences or familiarity with walks and nature (Marselle, et al. 2014).

Other literature discusses that group work is not necessary for nature therapy, and individual therapy with a counselor and client in a nature setting can help trigger particular emotions or sensations that were repressed or not previously experienced (Berger, 2004, 2005, 2006). This concept is known as ‘touching nature’ and it is based on the idea that through direct connection with nature, a person can reach the deeper parts of self, and thus reach incredible insights and a connection with the universe (Berger, 2004, 2005, 2006). From this we can determine that nature therapy could be effective with individuals who have experienced or are experiencing trauma through domestic violence situations.

As discussed earlier, some studies have been conducted with women and wilderness therapy, and wilderness therapy with sexual assault survivors, however, at this time, the research on nature therapy, or less structured outdoor therapy, is limited and the extent of effectiveness with this therapy model is not yet understood fully. More research to further understand the use of nature in therapy and the benefits of incorporating such approaches needs to be done. Research in various populations this type of therapy may support also is currently lacking. As more research and work is done in nature therapy, a more complete framework of the approach could be created and presented for other professionals, researchers and clinicians to use in their practises.

Summary

Due to the lack of research with informal nature therapy with women from domestic violence situations in healing their past trauma, there clearly is a need for more

studies and research in this area. Further research conducted would aid in understanding the benefits of informal nature therapy. Research would also help to understand the experiences of women in their healing journey in connection to nature.

Thus, this study begins to shed light on those experiences from the voices of women from domestic violence situations using nature therapy in their healing. The study addresses the questions of (a) What are the experiences of women from domestic violence situations using nature as part of their trauma healing journey? (b) What are the meanings attached (if any) to their experiences of nature therapy? Following are discussions of the methodology and methods used to help find the answers regarding this phenomenon.

Chapter Three - Methodology

Introduction

Following is a description of the method used to address the research questions:

(a) What are the experiences of women from domestic violence situations using nature therapy as part of their trauma healing journey? (b) What are the meanings attached (if any) to their experiences of nature therapy? A qualitative approach, specifically Interpretative Hermeneutic Phenomenology, was chosen for this study and is discussed below. Finally, research assumptions are reviewed, and data collection and analysis approaches are presented.

Qualitative Approach

Qualitative research uses words like “subjective, relative and contextual” in understanding human experiences from the perspectives of the participants, or people who experience the idea the researcher is looking at (Yegidis, Weinbach, & Meyers, 2012, p. 232). Quantitative research, however, stresses “deductive logic to arrive at conclusions” (Yegidis, et al., 2012, p. 232). Most quantitative studies are characterized by large samples, control of variables, measurement of variables through standardized data collection and statistical analysis of data (Yegidis, et al, 2012).

A qualitative approach was chosen for this particular study due to the need and want of providing thick, rich descriptions of how women from domestic violence situations have experienced the use of nature therapy in the process of their healing journey. Qualitative research is more apt at finding the meaning behind the experiences that people are involved in as it uses individual’s own words to describe their experiences. Both quantitative and qualitative research are valuable to the field of

knowledge (Yegidis, et al., 2012). Due to the subjective nature of this particular experience, and the lack of existing qualitative research in this area, qualitative research was chosen for this study.

Research Design

For the purposes of this study, an interpretive hermeneutical phenomenological approach has been conducted. These approaches and other qualitative methods have common qualities in that qualitative researchers look at the whole experience rather than its parts, they search for meanings of experience rather than measurements, they regard the data of experience as important in understanding human experiences, and the questions formulated using these approaches reflect a certain level of interest, involvement and commitment on part of the researcher (Moustakas, 1994). Following are descriptions of each and the basis of how these approaches have been most useful in this particular study.

Interpretive (hermeneutical) phenomenology. The importance of differentiating between interpretive and descriptive phenomenology is to create a link between method used and the philosophical underlying that guides the method. This allows the research to be clear and concise for the readers (Lopez, & Willis, 2004).

Descriptive (eidetic) phenomenology is based in the philosophy work of Husserl and is described as bringing out “essential components of the lived experiences specific to a group of people” (Lopez, & Willis, 2004, p. 727). It is also imperative to Husserl’s ideas behind descriptive phenomenology that the researcher not use their prior knowledge to understand the lived experiences of participants, which is achieved through bracketing—that the researcher withholds their own ideas or preconceived notions of the

experience being studied, so as not to influence the participants in their descriptions of the experience (Lopez, & Willis, 2004).

In comparison, interpretive (hermeneutical) phenomenology stems from the ideas of Heidegger, who modified Husserl's philosophy to guide a more "meaningful inquiry" (Lopez, & Willis, 2004, p. 728). This type of phenomenology is a process for "bringing out and making manifest what is normally hidden in human experience and human relations" (Lopez, & Willis, 2004, p.728). This goes beyond the description of ideas and looks for meanings within experiences. Hermeneutical study is about "what humans experience, rather than what they consciously know" (Solomon, as cited in Lopez, & Willis, 2004, p. 728).

A main component of Heidegger's philosophy was the concept of "being-in-the-world" which emphasizes that humans are a part of the world and cannot remove themselves from it (Lopez, & Willis, 2004, p. 729). Therefore, the idea of bracketing that is used in descriptive phenomenology is not applied in the work of interpretive phenomenology. Rather, personal knowledge is useful and can be necessary in this type of method (Geanellos, as cited in Lopez, & Willis, 2004). The researcher uses their prior knowledge or understanding by explicitly stating their pre-existing knowledge (literature reviews) and explaining the ways they use that knowledge in their inquiring study (assumptions) (Lopez, & Willis, 2004).

Heidigger also discussed the use of "co-constitutionality" (Koch, as cited in Lopez, & Willis, 2004, p.730) which described that the meanings that are found through the lived experiences of the participants, are a blending of both the participants experience and the researcher's existing knowledge (Lopez, & Willis, 2004). In this, as

the researcher in this study, I have created a field note journal in order to capture observations, emotions and perceptions of the experiences of the participants from the researcher perspective and included those notes in the discussion of the study.

Specifically, as I listened to the experiences of the participants and derived meaning from those experiences, I have kept in mind my own experiences in the phenomenon and present those as part of the biases or pre-existing knowledge in the discussion. In this way, the participants in the study become co-researchers to the primary researcher.

Finally, in critical hermeneutics, it is said that any interpretations made are typically influenced by “socially accepted ways of viewing reality” through a dominant perspective (Lopez, & Willis, 2004, p.730). In studying marginalized individuals, such as women from domestic violence situations, using critical hermeneutics can allow the individuals to liberate themselves from particular damaging situations. In such, women impacted by domestic violence may be viewed as unimportant by society at large and critical hermeneutics challenges that notion. In doing critical hermeneutical studies, the researcher challenges dominant ideas and recognizes the ways that societies ignore the “realities of the participants’ lived experiences” (Lopez, & Willis, 2004, p.730).

It is clear that there has been little research done in the world of academia involving more informal ideas of nature therapy into the healing journeys of individuals experiencing trauma, which more focuses the need for this type of approach to be presented in reviewing this phenomenon.

Assumptions

In adding to the validity and credibility of the research, assumptions have been made and inspected throughout the process of inquiry. Several assumptions I had going into the research include:

- 1) There is a transformative process that occurs when participating in informal nature therapies as part of healing trauma.
- 2) The participants have participated in and found meaning from the use of nature in their healing journeys.
- 3) The participants will share the experiences of using nature therapy with the researcher in a thick narrative with rich descriptions of the use and benefits of nature therapy.
- 4) Using interpretive phenomenology will bring forth meaning of the lived experiences of the participants, which can be helpful in bringing nature therapy into clinical application of counseling practises.
- 5) Personal knowledge and experience of the phenomenon will be noted and observed throughout the process but will not influence participants responses to interviews.

Process

The following section provides an outline to the ways in which the research has been conducted. Selection of participants has been outlined, data collection methods are described and analysis methods are presented.

Participants. In finding participants or co-researchers for this study, it was important to have individuals who were interested in and found some meaning through nature therapy in their healing journeys. Co-researchers were located using purposeful

sampling techniques, in the form of homogeneous sampling (Creswell, 2012) in order to include women who had experience with trauma and the use of nature in their healing. The co-researchers were provided with informed consent (Appendix A) outlining participation in recorded hour long interviews and member-checking of the transcripts as well as emerging themes from the analysis of those interviews. Due to the nature of the co-researchers' experiences, I focused on finding adult women, who had previously had experience with a domestic violence relationship, and participated in some form of informal nature therapy. This may have been with or without guidance from a professional, such as a counsellor, but it was required that individuals were also in therapy of some type during the time of the use of nature in their healing progress.

Specific inclusion criteria included: women who were 18 and older, who had experience of a domestic violence relationship, had been out of those relationships for at least a period of 6 months. Additionally, it was specified that individuals had seen a counsellor, psychologist or therapist in addition to some type of nature therapy in their healing concurrently. These criteria were necessary, as women from domestic violence relationships, who have experienced trauma, require some healing time prior to describing or sharing their past trauma with another person. In order to prevent re-traumatization, it was important for me to speak with individuals who had already processed or begun processing their trauma and have reached a point in their healing that it is comfortable for them to speak about their experiences. In order to reach that point, it is said that individuals need to go through some type of therapy with a specialized trauma therapist (Edmond, Rubin, & Wambach 1999).

Typically, those who have experienced trauma may see a counselor/therapist for anxiety, depression or substance use issues, which reveals violence and trauma underneath the presenting problems. Most counselors work with trauma-informed frameworks, addressing the presenting problems but also recognizing the symptoms and effects of trauma experiences, and this type of therapy was acceptable for processing purposes (HCH Clinicians' Network, 2010).

Recruitment. In recruiting co-researchers, posters were printed and put up in major counseling centers, both public and private, within southern Alberta (Appendix B), with explicit permission from institutions and agencies. Professionals in the areas of trauma work and nature therapy work were contacted and informed of the intention of research, and presented with flyers (Appendix B) to give to clients if they were willing, and finally, snowballing was used through word-of-mouth in achieving more participants. The sample size of this study was four adult women between the ages of 21 and 49.

Prior to interviews, a short screening was conducted to determine fit for study (Appendix C). Additionally, some demographic information was collected (Appendix D) and informed consent and confidentiality forms were signed by co-researchers (appendix A). Data was collected through the use of personal recorded interviews, about an hour long. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview script (Appendix E) in which further open-ended probing questions were asked to explore the experiences in more depth. These scripts provided guidance, but a more informal approach was taken in the form of conversation, as per interpretive phenomenological approach (Lopez, & Willis, 2004). All of the interviews were conducted by the primary researcher and were

conducted where the co-researchers felt most comfortable. Choices included the co-researcher's own home, researcher's work space, a park, or a coffee shop.

In the process of recruitment of the co-researchers for this study, during initial advertising, eight women came forward to be a part of the study through means of responding to ads they had seen at various locations, or through others who had noticed the advertisements. Of those eight potential co-researchers, two did not fit the inclusion criteria when completing the screening. One of those was due to still actively being in the abusive relationship and another due to not having any association to professional counselling or support. Further, of the six remaining potential co-researchers, one did not respond to attempts to set up an interview following screening, while another set up an interview but cancelled twice, and then informed the researcher of ongoing conflict with ex-partner (previously abusive partner). Due to this disclosure, I felt that it was best to exclude this participant in the interests of safety for myself and the potential co-researcher. I reflected on the recruitment process in the researcher journal:

Given that several of the original potential co-researchers were unable to participate, I decided to do another round of advertising two months later, to try to gain more co-researchers for the study. I originally wanted to have between four and eight participants. Once data analysis began, I was able to determine that the four interviews contained enough rich descriptions in order to provide answers to the research questions. (Research Journal, 15/12/15)

No potential co-researchers came forward in response to the second round of advertising. It is my opinion and assumption that when the second round of advertising happened, there were too many conflicts with holidays. One month following the second

round of advertising, I began the analysis of the data, at which point another potential co-researcher came forward. However I was not able to reach that individual after the initial screening to set up an interview. I decided to withdraw advertising for the study at that point.

Researcher reflexivity. As mentioned earlier, I journaled about my own experiences of nature in healing and as the interviews progressed, any observations or emotions that arose for me were noted. This helped to speak to any personal biases that may have hindered the research (Creswell, 2012). As I have personal interest and commitment to the topic under study, it is important to speak to self-disclosure.

I did not self-disclose with the co-researchers about my own trauma experiences, nor did I discuss with the co-researchers my experiences of informal nature therapy, in the context of or prior to the interviews. This was to remain objective and minimize the possibility of researcher bias of influencing the co-researchers responses. However, following interview, I, as discussed prior, included some personal reflective notes as part of the discussion of the study. In completing the transcriptions, co-researchers had an option to be emailed and given the opportunity to review the analysis of themes and correct any errors, so as to allow for member checking. Following the completion of the study, co-researchers were given the option to receive a copy of the completed research as to provide a summary of the final research results.

Reflecting on the interview processes with the co-researchers, I journaled about my experiences before and after each interview. My first interview presented some anxieties:

Tomorrow is my first thesis interview and I'm feeling a little nervous about how it's going to go, but excited at the same time about beginning this journey. My

first co-researcher is someone known to me and I've had mixed feelings about including her in the study. On one hand, my relationship with her prior to this thesis could bias my questions or interpretations of the data but on the other hand, it could enrich the process. At this point I'm eager to see how it plays out. [...]

Just had the first interview. It went well and was a relaxed process. I found myself a little surprised at how much detail she went into with the domestic violence events, which makes me wonder if I should rephrase how I'm asking the question. I also have to wonder if our prior relationship had some influence in her comfortability in going into those details. I did find this first interview difficult in some respects. It was difficult to listen without stepping in the "counselor" role and staying in the "researcher" role. I found that reflecting points she said back to her stimulated deeper processing. I think this is something to keep up in future interviews. Following the interview, I found myself thinking of other questions I'd like to ask co-researchers to enrich the information. (Researcher Journal, 17-18/09/15)

Having a prior relationship with the first co-researcher was an interesting experience, but I feel in allowing some researcher bias into this study, may have had deeper impacts on the outcomes. Due to the nature of the existing relationship, the co-researcher felt more comfortable discussing her experiences with me than with someone unknown to her. Though having a relationship with this co-researcher may include bias into the research, it was my goal and aim to provide the same experience to her as any other co-researcher, and thus including a journal entry to reflect on my own perceptions of the experience was important to include within this research. The next three

interviews, reflecting off the first interview, allowed me the space to balance the “counselor” role with the “researcher” role without crossing the boundaries of those two different processes. As the interviews went on, there was more comfortability in the process and the questions being asked.

This interview felt descriptive and rich. The co-researcher was comfortable with all topics which made it comfortable for me. The interview was outlined with my main interview script but was more of a informal conversation, which was navigated well. I noticed themes already between the two co-researchers and I am getting more curious to see how it connects with other’s experiences. This co-researcher was natural, open and presented authentically. I’m finding the process to flow more naturally, as I move along. (Researcher Journal, 24/09/15)

Data Analysis

In conducting analysis of the data collected from co-researchers, I used Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in order to look at how participants described their lived experiences and interpreted those experiences into meanings (themes) (Smith, & Osborn, 2007). IPA not only explores the personal experience of the co-researchers, but allows for an active role for the researcher in the process; as the researcher attempts to understand the co-researchers’ personal worlds, they are hindered by their own perceptions and understanding. This idea is needed in order to make sense of another’s personal experiences, through interpretation. This represents a “two-stage interpretation or double hermeneutic” (Smith, & Osborn, 2007, p. 59).

An assumption of IPA is that the researcher is interested in learning about the co-researcher’s psychological world; meaning is the central goal (Smith, & Osborn, 2007).

In using IPA as a way of analysis, it was important to know that qualitative interpretative work is a personal process (Smith, & Osborn 2007). In analysing data for multiple cases, it has been suggested to examine interview transcripts one by one (Smith, & Osborn, 2007). A step by step approach is outlined in using IPA (Smith, & Osborn, 2007) and was used in this study.

- 1.) Transcribe the interviews of the co-researchers
- 2.) Read through transcription to gain a general understanding of the process
- 3.) Re-read the transcription using the left margin to note any interesting or significant things the co-researcher said
- 4.) Read through the transcription again, using the right margin to begin to piece together emerging themes
- 5.) Connect themes by looking at links between them; clustering on a separate sheet
- 6.) Compare clustering with original transcript to ensure correct wording
- 7.) Create a table of clustered themes in order to create superordinate themes and link in key words and page numbers of transcripts
- 8.) Complete the same process with all transcriptions of co-researchers.
You may inform other transcripts of the superordinate list from the first transcript
- 9.) Create a final table of superordinate themes. Researcher prioritizes and reduces data to focus on particular themes

- 10.) Translate themes into a narrative write up; explaining and illustrating them through use of quotations.

The process of re-reading transcripts allowed me to become more familiar with the interview. There were no expectations of what I would pull out from the transcripts. There may be comments, paraphrasing, connections, interpretations, language used, discrepancies, etc. In reviewing transcript again, I pulled out themes; phrases that held the essence of what was said in the text (Smith, & Osborn, 2007). I made no attempts at removing or choosing certain areas for attention; the number of themes reflected richness of the passages (Smith, & Osborn, 2007). Clusters of themes relates to turning the chronologically ordered themes in the transcript, into a list of themes that relate to one another, and thus create 'titles' for those clusters in order to present superordinate themes, with direct links to where in the transcript those themes were noticed, and key words related to the superordinate theme.

In following this process with all the transcripts, I used the first transcript to inform the others of possible emerging themes. Once all transcriptions were coded I then created a final table of superordinate themes (Appendix G) from all the transcriptions (Smith, & Osborn, 2007). Finally, themes were written in narrative form and were explained and illustrated using quotations in the results and discussion sections.

One of the biggest challenges in using this approach, was that it created a lot of room for interpretation and skill in finding themes of the co-researchers narratives. The interpretation of the data was something I had anxieties about going into, but through the process and discussion of the research with others, I became re-engaged in the data. These anxieties and re-engagements were noted in my journal:

I'm unsure of how the analysis process looks at this point in time, and feel uncertain of my process. At times I find myself wondering how others would interpret the data? Being able to step back and look at the data objectively can be a challenge. Discussing the research with others opens a lot of insight for me into the process, however. In doing the initial analyses, themes have come out very naturally. I'm noticing the openness, release and energy of the main themes. I'm beginning to notice the different phases the co-researchers have in using nature and the meanings about self through the experience of nature. As I continue to work through the analysis I feel that keeping an eye on not only specific themes, but the phases and progression of the self could be important. Keeping myself open to the interpretation of the data is becoming easier, the more I'm able to immerse and step back. (Researcher Journal, 03/09/16)

As well, having a personal connection to the data, during the analysis of this thesis, I found myself having difficulty in immersing myself in the data, when I was lacking my own nature experiences. I captured these difficulties in the researcher journal:

“A lot is beginning to come out and I'm able to immerse myself in the data. Feeling at times that taking a step back is giving me some clarity into what I'm really looking at. I'm still unsure of the organizational process at this point. The exploration at this stage has been tedious and a balance of immersion and stepping back. Exploring nature healing in this way, while limited in my own nature experience has been difficult. I find myself craving the very experience the co-researchers speak about. At this point, I'm finding that I'm personally being

drawn into nature to help heal some of the stress of writing this thesis.”

(Researcher Journal, 04/04/16)

Ensuring quality

It is important for qualitative research to ensure validity of the study through credibility and accuracy. Many different suggestions are offered as to how to achieve this (e.g. Creswell, & Miller as cited in Creswell, 2012; Lincoln, & Guba, 1985). Creswell's (2012) three validity strategies; triangulation, member checking and auditing were used in this study to remain accurate and credible in the research.

Triangulation, the process of substantiating evidence, has been used by not only incorporating the researcher's findings, but also through the literature review from other works in nature therapy as well as treatment methods for women in domestic violence situations (Creswell, 2012). I have substantiated the research with the observational journaling, as discussed earlier, by combining research understanding with co-researcher lived experience, and through reviewing of literature within the areas of interest. In using the reflexive journaling, I was able to explore insecurities and excitement for what I was finding in immersing myself in the data analysis.

I'm finding that pulling out themes that are relevant to my research questions is beginning to take a natural process. Doing the initial analyses of the transcripts, themes have come out very naturally. I wonder if others would interpret the data in a similar way? I'm noticing several themes and making connections to more subordinate themes or phases of using nature. As I continue to work and immerse myself, I feel that keeping an eye not only on specific themes involved in the

nature experience but also the phases could be important. (Researcher Journal, 03/03/16)

Insecurities of how others may interpret the data and my own process of interpretation was later addressed through auditing. Auditing occurred to some extent in participation of the supervisor and committee of the study, in which evaluative feedback regarding strengths and weaknesses was given to the researcher in regards to the study and feedback regarding themes and transcripts were provided (Creswell, 2013). As described in the research methods section, I have used member checking by presenting transcripts, quotations and themes to the co-researchers to ensure accuracy of presentation of the data; descriptions are complete, themes are realistic, and interpretations are fair; and to provide further triangulation (Creswell, 2013).

Ethical Considerations

An ethics proposal was presented to the University of Lethbridge Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee (HSRC). The study adheres to the Tri-Council Policy Statement of Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (Panel on Research Ethics, 2014) Ethical considerations are important in ensuring the highest ethical standard and protection of co-researchers, researcher and institution of research, from any harm. Informed consent and confidentiality agreements have been reviewed and signed by all co-researchers.

Summary

In this chapter, methodology and research designs were discussed in accordance to the research questions. Interpretive hermeneutical phenomenology was reviewed, and interpretive phenomenological analysis was presented. Processes ensuring quality and

validity were discussed, and ethical considerations presented. The following chapters present the outcome of the study including the emerging and over-arching themes, discussion and interpretations and implications for counselling.

Chapter Four – Exploring Themes

Introduction

Following are the descriptions of the four co-researchers and the demographics of each within a demographic table. As discussed in the previous chapter, an interpretive phenomenological analysis approach was used to transcribe and derive themes from the co-researchers' interviews, which is presented. A brief overview is presented of the nine themes within three phases, followed by the breakdown of each theme supported through quotations from the co-researchers.

Demographics and Descriptions

The interviews for this research were conducted in September-November 2015. The recruitment advertisements for the research were posted throughout the University of Lethbridge, several agencies working with women fleeing abuse throughout Southern Alberta and at private offices of psychologists. One co-researcher was known to me prior to this research, and she volunteered when discussing the research I was interested in conducting. Two of the other co-researchers responded to advertisements around the city, while the last co-researcher found out about the study through snow-ball sampling (Creswell, 2012). Two of the participants live in the city permanently, one is in the city temporarily but is originally from a larger city in Alberta, and the last resides in a rural area outside of the city.

All the co-researchers are Caucasian females who have experienced diverse backgrounds in abusive relationships. Two of the co-researchers stated the relationship in question was their first relationship, one of the co-researchers discussed her experiences as a lifestyle, and another came from several abusive relationships and marriages. Their

ages ranged from 21 to 49. Two co-researchers had completed a bachelor's level education, with one of the co-researchers currently working on her Masters and the other practising as a spiritual healer. The other two had completed high school level education, with both of those co-researchers working towards their bachelor degrees, one studying in psychology and the other in social work. Three of the four co-researchers are currently in relationships, with two of those engaged to be married. One co-researcher is not currently in a relationship. All the co-researcher's identified themselves as heterosexual. Their experiences of domestic violence were diverse and included physical, mental, emotional, financial, sexual and spiritual abuses.

Table 1

Demographic chart of the four co-researchers

<u>Co- Researcher</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Ethnicity</u>	<u>Age category</u>	<u>Education</u>	<u>Marital Status</u>	<u>Identification</u>
"Marie"	Female	Caucasian	30-39	Bachelor	Common Law/Engaged	Heterosexual
"Jessica"	Female	Caucasian	40-49	College	Single	Heterosexual
"Hannah"	Female	Caucasian	18-29	High school	Engaged	Heterosexual
"Jackie"	Female	Caucasian	40-49	High school	Common Law	Heterosexual

Introduction to Themes

Based on the interpretive phenomenological analysis process discussed in chapter 3, and an immersion into the transcripts following the interviews, the first research question of “How do women from domestic violence situations experience nature in the healing journey” can be answered following three distinct phases of the co-researchers experience of nature. The first phase, *Shut In*, begins the process of the co-researchers and differentiates these individuals from others, as they were first involved in an abusive relationship experience. This phase identifies the limited or no nature access part of their journey, which is highlighted by a feeling of confinement and no escape. The second phase, *Time For Me*, is the place where for several of the co-researchers, there was a choice point, where the co-researchers identified youth experience in nature and felt a draw back into nature. There was diversity of experiences and the healing began. The final phase, *The Way It’s Supposed to Be*, was where the co-researchers found the most healing and found deep meaning in their nature experiences. There was also a shift in stages for the co-researchers between the three phases, where *Negative Coping* through self-medicating, or isolating was predominantly used during the *Shut In* phase, and *Positive Coping* through nature was used in the *The Way It’s Supposed to Be* phase. In the middle phase, *Time for Me*, the co-researchers had a “choice point” and decided which path to take when they were going through difficult times.

Through deep immersion in the data to uncover the themes, not only was the IPA process used to create tables of themes and sub-themes, but a mapping process was also used to better organize and flush out the appropriate themes from the data. The tables of themes divided by phases are included in the following exploration of each phase, while

the mapping process has been included at the end of this research as an appendix (Appendix H).

It is important to note that when immersing myself in the data and stepping back to locate the themes, the nine themes that emerged through the three phases, have been interwoven at various points in the interviews. The themes and sub-themes seemed incredibly interconnected through the whole healing journey for the co-researchers and these themes are interconnected in this research as well.

Phase One: Shut In

In the first phase, *Shut In*, the co-researchers were actively engaged in the abusive relationships in question, and within this process, there was an experience of feeling lost. The first theme: *Lost in Myself*, can be broken down into two sections; *I Can Fix It* and *Who Am I?* This part of their healing journey, there was a limitation to nature experiences, either due to the abusive relationship, or their own negative coping mechanisms in place. In the midst of the end of the relationships, a second theme: *Any Means to Escape*, emerged. This is where the negative coping was mainly used to overcome the effects of the abuse; *Ways to Forget*, and seeing *Nature as a Way Out*.

Table 2

Phase 1: Shut In

<u>Themes</u>	<u>Sub-themes</u>
Lost in Myself	I Can Fix It
	Who Am I?
Any Means to Escape	Ways to Forget
	Nature As a Way Out

Lost in myself. When exploring these relationships and the meanings and emotions associated with experiencing abuse, all of the co-researchers discussed feelings of confinement or being trapped at one point or another. The meanings of these relationships impacted their self-worth, self-esteem and identity in a profound way. Marie recounted the terrifying experience of feeling trapped that affected her on a deep level:

I wanted to fight back but I just didn't know what to do. I was saying things that were probably provoking the situation to get worse, things like 'what kind of man touches a woman like this' but I couldn't get out of the house and he was blocking the door way and I couldn't stop crying.

Similarly, Jessica, in this experience spoke of the connection to her own value in the relationship and the way she felt about herself as a person: "It [relationship] became draining and I was so beaten down that I felt I didn't have an option of going anywhere because I certainly didn't deserve any better." She continued to discuss the ways in which she coped following the relationship and described her feelings of being shut in and having no access to nature:

You know I hardly ever left my house. I was pretty much a shut in. So I was basically by the time we finished up, I was a shut in. I didn't have access to nature. I was in my living room pretty much 24/7. I was shut in. I didn't have access to anything but my living room and bedroom.

Jackie spoke of the stigma attached to being in a domestic violence situation and how others just don't understand the experience if they have not lived it:

I was trying to get away. And one thing that really ticks me off is women that are in abusive relationships and people going well why they don't just leave. They don't have any idea how hard that is. You're so scared for your life and I wish people wouldn't look at women that way because you don't know how hard it is until you lived it. I lived it. I look at those women and say just find your inner strength, it's there. And it's scary. I've been in women's shelters, I've been there. [...] I always have a little nest egg on the side, just in case I have to go. So I can grab my kids and run.

The co-researchers brought up this idea of feeling *shut in* throughout the discussions of the relationships and the impact that this had on their self-esteem. The shame associated with the relationships added to this feeling of being lost in themselves. Hannah recalled: "So I had nothing, and I didn't actually tell it to my parents until the summer." Jackie mirrored this in her own recollection of telling family about the abuse she experienced: "And see I never told my family what they were doing. I just... how do you tell your family!" Marie also recognized her own shame process of coming out of the relationship and being unable to explain to those around her:

I woke up and I was crying. I couldn't tell my parents because I was so ashamed of what I had done. I was just so ashamed of myself and then I ended up calling him in the morning... and crying to him about what he had done because I felt like I couldn't tell anybody what happened and I didn't want to tell anybody because I didn't know what to do because I was a complete wreck.

The feelings of being stripped of their identity and worth as human beings through the abuse was a consistent and ongoing pattern throughout all the interviews. Once they

reached a point of needing something to change, the thought of *I can fix it* came into play, as well as questioning their own behaviours and experiences in the relationships.

I can fix it. All the co-researchers in this study have the shared experience of being in an abusive relationship at some point in their lives. In exploring the meanings of these relationships, several of the co-researchers mentioned the thoughts of being able to fix or correct the situation they were in. Most of the co-researchers identified times in the relationship that they felt they were to blame, and if they could work on themselves or change their own behaviour, the relationship may change. At the same time, other co-researchers believed that though they knew about the abusive nature of their partners, it would be different with them.

Marie discussed that she knew about her partners' abusive tendencies at the beginning of the relationships, but felt it may be different this time:

They had admitted to me quite early that they had been abusive, they had been to jail, into a lot of illegal activities and at the time that's what I was into. I was into bad boys. There was this element of oh well, he won't do that to me. Just because I thought I was a really nice person and why would I give any reason for someone to do that to me.

She went on to explain later on about the ideas she had behind being into 'bad boys' and the ideas that the relationship would change:

My dad was a bad boy and he did actually change his whole life to be with my mom and I think that's kind of where that fantasy came from because my parents relationship was so full of love, and kindness and care and respect, that ... on the

whole that is kind of where that came from, the whole oh I want a bad boy who loves me enough that want to change his life to be with me.

Jessica explained that in the earlier stages of the relationship, things were going well, and though there may be a lot of tension and arguments, this was also passion.

I really thought he was a nice guy! He was very introverted, shy, he was 25 and had never really been in a full actual relationship before and I was 'yeah, oh this is so amazing' and then it soured kind of quick and I don't know why it became... I guess the emotions were so high from the arguing and the turmoil, it was something... as long as you're feeling something and it's intense, it's a reason to stay sometimes.

She also recognized after the relationship ended that there was a lot of reflection on whether she could have done something to make things different.

It was a lot of feeling sorry for myself and a lot of pining for him and a lot of trying to figure out how if we went to marriage therapy we could fix things... I could fix him. I was getting stuck in this idea that I could fix him and that somehow I was going to fix our family. I put a lot of pressure on myself to think I was more powerful than I was. That I was going to go in and I was going to rescue him, save him, help him. I was going to do these things. I guess my biggest mistake was... he never asked to be helped. He never asked to be fixed and I was rather presumptuous in thinking I could or should.

Jackie talked about trying to make one of the marriages she had work by going to counselling, but her partner was not interested in fixing anything. She stated "I did try marriage counselling and he walked it there and said there's nothing wrong with the

marriage and I just went 'I can't do this anymore.' As well, Marie discussed having the power over the partner after the critical abuse incident in her relationship where counselling was a thought:

I kept talking to him for a month after because he kept calling me crying and saying I want to go to couples counselling and all these things. There was this sense of having a lot of power over him that made me, it's twisted but it made me feel really good, to have this man cry to me about what he had done to me, and make all these promises.

All the co-researchers could identify that there was some point in their relationships that they felt things would change or a recognition of wanting to fix the relationship. As these changes did not occur, the abuse led to feelings of questioning who they were.

Who am I? Several of the co-researchers discussed their feelings about themselves and the reasons they were in the relationships they were in at the time. Marie explained that her choice in relationship related to her own negative feelings about herself:

This sounds awful but I tended to date down quite a bit. I didn't feel good about myself so if I partnered myself with someone with who was much below where I was at in life, I would feel great about myself! So there's some flaws with how I was picking partners at the time.

Jessica explained the point in the relationship where she began questioning her own behaviours and actions:

We would get into really heated arguments. Until one day I threw a coffee mug at him! Just because he had been so aggressive and just talking crap at me and

calling me names and so it really, I felt like I kicked it up a notch and allowed the next step to happen. When I hurled the coffee mug at him I was like I never have been in a relationship where I thought it was okay to hurl a coffee mug, why is it okay to hurl it at him?! I knew that amount of fighting and how intense it got and how fast it got lit up that it was just not in a normal space.

Similarly, Hannah could identify with the negative feelings about herself in her own relationship as moving to a new city she was feeling isolated and alone. Her abusive partner gave her a feeling of having someone who cared for her: “So at the time I felt that someone cared, because I moved from [another city]. I didn’t really have anyone so someone was looking out for me, someone cared about me.” Jessica connected the experience of the abuse with her own self-worth and self-esteem, she felt a sense of validation from the abuse she experienced:

Oh I deserved it [the abuse]! I felt he was validating how I was feeling. So if he said I was fat and ugly I already sort of felt that. So it was almost like he was my friend in validating that, like oh thank you for actually being someone that tells me the truth.

The impacts of the abuse on self-worth was huge for the co-researchers. Marie summed it up as:

“I lost all my self-respect. I can’t talk to my friends and family. Nobody understands where I’m at anymore and just being re-victimized by the school and doctors.” As the relationships progressed, or started to end, the co-researchers could identify how low they were in their own emotional well-being. Jackie commented on her experience going to counselling:

When I went into counselling after that [abuse], I didn't even hit the charts. They put me on a computer, like they had me answer a bunch of questions and I didn't even make the scale. That's how buried I was. Even the counsellor was like, you're like 6 feet under and walking still.

Jackie had several experiences of domestic violence, and she continued to talk about the point when she started questioning what was going on and how she was involved in it at a crucial point in one of those relationships:

After my twins were born... I had a c section and he had come home off the road. I mean, I had them Friday, I was home Sunday and he wanted sex. I mean I was cut from here to here [shows on stomach]. I had twins, so I rolled off the bed because I could hardly walk and crawled to the couch. And he came out there and sat beside me and this is what I had lived with; said if he had his way, he would give up every one of the god damn kids up for adoption so he could have me to himself. This is what I lived in. That's about when I started going, what am I doing?

At this stage, the co-researchers were beginning to look for a way out, or a way to forget about the abuse and its effects on their self-esteem. Let's move along towards those escape methods the co-researchers took to find their way out.

Any means to escape. The second theme of the phase *Shut In*, related to finding ways to numb certain experiences or escape from the abuse in the home. There were several negative coping strategies that the co-researchers engaged in from self-medication through drugs/alcohol or food or leaving the home. One of the co-researchers found that her path to nature began even during her relationships.

Ways to forget. Several of the co-researchers found that during the relationships, due to the decreased self-worth and self-esteem they experienced, their coping strategies were negative. As many of them felt trapped in the relationships, this led to coping in any way they could find. Marie explains her feelings of being trapped and the outcome of these experiences:

I thought how the hell am I going to get out of here. Then he had me cornered and I was begging him to let me go. [...] 4 or 5 hours he kept me in there and confined me like that. [...] When I got out, he said do you want a beer. And I took a beer. Because I was frozen, in shock I didn't know what the hell just happened. [...] Sometimes it's easier to slip back into the pattern of I'm overstimulated and smoking some weed from this pipe is an instant right here right now, though I don't like the outcome of that; the eating, the paranoia.

A shared experience of Jessica, was the negative coping after the effects of the abuse. She talked about the patterns she found in her life in dealing with the emotions she experienced:

It is hard when you get caught in those loops and it is hard to progress forward. I guess some of the things we look at are ways I might self-sabotage so working on food addiction, unhealthy lifestyle choices I might make for myself.

Hannah's experience of negative coping was slightly different to the other co-researchers but she still felt that she used negative means of overcoming the experiences she had faced:

Well right after we broke up, I kind of went through a phase where I didn't really care what happened so I would be at the bars every weekend, I slept around a lot

and that's how I met him [new partner]. That was... probably the lowest night I've ever had, the night I met him. That was the drunkest I've ever been, I was in one of those mindsets of like I don't care what happens to me in the morning.

Though three of the co-researchers shared in the negative coping during and following the relationships, Jackie had found a different way to cope with her experiences. She made the choice to use nature, even when she was in the relationships.

Nature as a way out. Though Jackie found herself in the same place as the other co-researchers in terms of being confined and trapped in the relationships she experiences, she found a different way to cope with those experiences. Throughout her interview, she talked about the feelings of being trapped in various ways, and then began talking about how she coped:

But you could go there [ocean] and I could listen to the roar of the ocean, and listen to the kids laughing and playing. It just... everything was okay. I knew I could do it. I knew it was going to be okay. I'd go home and breathe and go okay, are we ready... because we know what's coming. When we were in a fight, I always left the house, I couldn't take the energy in the house, so I'd leave and we'd go, I'd take the kids to a park.

Though not all the co-researchers used negative coping strategies for the abuse they experienced, they all found ways to cope with the effects of the abuse on their self-esteem, whether temporarily or long-term. All the co-researchers experienced some degree of feeling confined in their relationships and in their own beings. Having this background of information and insight into the experiences they had while in the

domestic violence relationships, helps to shed light on the healing journey and the roles that nature played in their experiences.

Throughout the first phase, we have looked at the pattern of identifying feelings of being trapped, confined or “shut in”. The exploration of the co-researchers feeling lost in themselves, through feeling they could fix things, and the subsequent feelings of loss of self-esteem, identity and worth helps shape the next phase of the co-researchers experiences, *Time for Me*, when they began to open up to the experience of nature and began healing the trauma.

Phase Two: Time for Me

In the second phase for co-researchers, *Time for Me*, co-researchers discussed the importance of finding themselves again and focusing on the value of their own beings. There was a point where the co-researchers identified past experiences with nature that they had growing up, which seemed to have drawn them back into trying to re-experience those positive feelings associated with being in nature. The first theme: *Re-building the Self*, the co-researchers spoke of the important aspects of re-defining their self-esteems and regaining a sense of who they were. They also presented ideas related to showing their children the importance of valuing oneself. The second theme: *Life-Long Journey: Healing is Ongoing*, presented the ongoing process of healing from the domestic violence. All co-researchers discussed the ideas that healing is ongoing, and though they may heal eventually from the abuse they experiences, they will continue to have other areas of their lives that need healing. Finally, a third theme arose, *I Remember When*, which captures this process, where not only did the co-researchers have *Youth*

Experiences, but there was also a sense of *Nostalgia* for the times in their childhood, and a point of *Making the Choice* to go back to having those experiences.

Table 3

Phase 2: Time for Me

<u>Themes</u>	<u>Sub-themes</u>
Re-building the Self	
Life-long Journey, Healing is Ongoing	
I Remember When	Youth Experiences
	Nostalgia
	Making the Choice

Re-building the self. The process of re-building the self occurred for the co-researchers following their experiences of feeling shut in by the domestic violent relationships they had been a part of. This stage of the co-researchers' experience came sometimes months or years after their experiences, but at times also occurred as they made the decisions to leave relationships. Some of the co-researchers felt that working on their identity was important to them as they felt this was stripped away in the duration of the relationship, others felt that the relationships were something that they had to go through in order to find the strength and courage within themselves and find their true path in life.

The co-researchers with children or new partners identified that they wanted to show the people that were important in their lives, how to be independent and stay true to who they are. Nature was a part of this process, but was not the only aspect of the re-building. All four of the co-researchers identified counselling at some point in time, whether individual or group, was a contributing factor to them re-building what they lost in themselves.

As part of the process of re-building their own identities, several themes unrelated to this study came up, which will be discussed in the other findings section of this chapter. It's important to understand the connection between re-building the self and nature experiences. Within this phase, co-researchers' identified that building on their own self-esteem and connecting to themselves through different avenues, played a role in their strength and ability to then reconnect with nature.

Identity is something that is often lost or given up when experiencing an abusive relationship; we discussed the emotions associated with self-worth, self-esteem and identity in the first phase of the co-researchers' experiences. As introduced in Chapter Two, there is a vast amount of research that discusses the phenomena of loss of identity in abuse. This issue will be reviewed further in Chapter Five. The co-researchers discussed the re-building of their identity that they experienced in a variety of ways. While this was common, Jessica went into detail about her experience following the relationship as a time to find herself again, without a partner. She used therapy and discovered what was important for her own growth:

I don't want to repeat it. I want to make sure that my junk is fixed so that I'm not going to pick ... him, again. [...] It's totally selfish time. It's time for me to get

my post- secondary. It's time for me to be able to know that I'm financially able to take care of myself. It's time for me to bond with my children. It's time for me to show my daughter that it's okay to be independent. That my self-esteem is not contingent on what another human being says to me. Um that she sees how important post-secondary is. That I'm able to take the time to go counselors, to make friendships, yeah...Because once I'm in a relationship, I may not necessarily get to do the selfish things I want to do so I'm taking advantage of this and I'm being entirely selfish for me and the kids.

The process of understanding the previous relationships and their own identity making through counselling and relationships was a joint process for Marie:

Some of the counseling I was going into made it kind of concrete that that was a flawed way of thinking that a relationship looks like that. It was probably the first time that I had dated somebody that I felt I didn't deserve to be with. Like because he was so good and so dating up I guess and there was this desire to be as good. I feel like I have put in a lot of work because it was that I needed to heal. Took a lot of counselling and healing trying to understand how trauma impacts people and then trying to communicate that to him.

The understanding of self and the value of the self was important to the co-researchers in their healing journey. Several co-researchers talked about what they needed to re-learn about the value of themselves and the importance of who they were either due to the relationship or following the relationship. Jessica focused on this aspect of her journey heavily in our conversations:

I'm allowing myself to be valuable and see myself as valuable and that's why now the importance of working on a career and not just martyring myself. Before it was for everybody else, for everybody else. And now, really... going to school is for me. One day the kids will leave me and I better have my crap together because it's going to just be me. So now I'm a little more focused on what I can do. [...] I still have that inner script of I'm not worthy. So working on those and trying to allow myself and actually believe in my value.

Feeling valuable in her own journey has been an important aspect of healing for Jessica. She has been working on her own scripts and value for the last seven years following the abusive marriage she experienced. It was the same finding of value and strength that Jackie processed; Jackie experienced finding her own value, strength and happiness following her relationships, and feels that her abusive experiences are something she had to go through in order to find the true value of herself:

It's painful to think of the abuse. I mean, it is. Once you've come through it and you're healed, you do ask yourself why it took you so long and why you kept going back in. You do. And I mean I don't know if it's normal but to me it's normal to ask. Everything is good now but why would I stay. You know, I was risking my kids. Why did I stay? But...it helped me grow so much. It (sigh) pushed me on the path I'm supposed to be on. It pushed me in the direction I'm supposed to go. It made me rely on myself. Look deep inside and find the truth. And... just... never give up. I learned to never give up. You can get through anything.

This profound statement of having the abusive relationships as a learning experience to find herself gave her a deeper meaning for what she wanted in her life and how she could give back in her life:

I'm happy. I enjoy life. I'm excited every day just to see it all. I just want to see everything still and my kids grow up and I can just leave one day. Just go somewhere see the world. That's what I want to do. It actually inspired me to do more. [...] We didn't have a lot of money, we struggled for everything we had because I left and we'd have nothing and I'd start over again. And so trauma healing... I took a spiritual path. Not religious. Very spiritual. And I look to the angels and anyone I could find out there... I quit denying who I was.

The importance of finding who she was in her life and showing this to her kids was also another connection to re-building herself to move forward:

With the low self-confidence I had growing up. I actually learned about me. I taught this to my kids from the day I went [to a conference], and on their mirror in the bathroom, you'll see it says believe, or dream. There's 4 bathrooms in our house, so on each mirror there's something different. I said, the only person you have to please and know is the person looking back at you. Give up what everyone else is saying about you. If you look at that person and like that person and that person is looking back at you that's all that matters. And I've raised them that way, and that's stuck.

The co-researchers weighed heavily on the importance of finding their identity following the abusive relationships they were a part of. In the path of finding their own value and strength, there was also the mentality of showing others the strength they had; teaching

children to value themselves and stand up for what is right. Through building their own selves up, they could be a vessel to teach others how to believe in themselves.

Two of the co-researchers have children, and discussed how their own healing created a pathway to showing their children how to operate in the world in an authentic way. Jessica discussed that having her children observe the abuse she endured led her to focus on herself, in order to show her children the importance of valuing yourself:

Yeah the crowning apex of it was one day we were in the kitchen kind of arguing and he called me a cunt in front of my daughter. And when he left, he stormed out of the house and my mom came upstairs and said that's the last time my granddaughter hears you called that. And I really had to think, it was so normalized that that would be abnormal. I had to think for a second, oh my gosh, my daughter. My little girl is going to grow up thinking that her mother is that. And that men can speak to women like that and that that's okay. [...] When I was realized the words that my ex-husband was saying... I thought he's teaching my son how to treat his next relationship. And I never want those words to come from my son's mouth. And I don't want him to ever think that he can treat a lady like that. Ever. Or another human being. And that's what was being modeled. And I was so scared he was going to be a cruel human being. So I thought if I'm being treated in my next relationship by a man who's going to treat me with respect, then he's going to learn that's what's relationships can be and that's what a man will do. He will respect who he's with as well.

The importance of how the children learn about respecting themselves and others was an important factor for their growth process. Jackie identified the same ideas from her own relationship:

Yeah and never let my kids feel like I did. And if I heard anyone swearing or calling my kids down, I'd just... here's momma bear. With [one abusive partner], I think it was when the kids watched him picking glass out of my back. I didn't know how to explain that. I told her I fell. I didn't know how else to tell her, you don't tell a kid that he threw you through a glass table. So I just said I fell and Shane was getting the glass out. And when I she saw that, I got scared that once my kids got to a certain age, that he would start hurting them. [...] I never changed how we lived at home and I rarely let them see me cry. They are good kids, they're amazing. I couldn't be prouder of them. I worry about them, well, the one, the one that her dad molested, I worry about her. Because, she was in counselling for a long time. But I do worry about her letting a man get away with more than he should because of what her dad did to her. She's the one I have to watch. My oldest, a guy hit her once, and I thought he was going to get a cast iron frying pan against his head. I was like good on you girl. That's what mom wants to see. I told them, you don't let that happen.

Through the process of re-building themselves to create a new or improved identity for themselves the co-researchers' identified the importance of ongoing healing. Though re-building did not fully include the use of nature, it was an important part of the healing journey. There will always be healing to be done; whether related to their domestic violence experiences or the effects of it, it will continue to be a process.

Life-long journey: Healing is ongoing. The second theme within this phase of Time for Me and beginning to rebuild and find importance in identity, was the life long journey this experience created for them. All the co-researchers identified that healing is an ongoing process for them. Some co-researchers felt the healing of domestic violence is coming to an end, but that there will always be things to heal from; while others simply stated that their experiences will continuously be something they need to work on. They also recognized that there was a wish that there would be an end, but they feel that such a thing is not possible for them. When speaking with Marie about the trauma healing journey she's been on, she stated:

The last six and a half years of my life. Pretty much. Trauma healing journey. I think it's like a life long journey. That's what comes up for me. It's really interesting to get so far away from a situation and put so much energy into counseling and things like that and feel like oh man I feel really good, I'm in a great spot... and that lasts for maybe 4 months and then you smell a cologne the person wore and you're right back to that frozen, terrified spot, and you're like thinking where'd that come from. It really is a journey and its like, I don't know if there's an end point because the reactions to healing the trauma change and when it starts to get healed the energy coming from that situation can start to look positive. I don't know if there's an end point but it's a roller-coaster; a lot of energy and can be really beautiful but there is a lot of pain- growing pain that happens in it.

This idea that things can seem positive and better for a while, and then something triggers the experience again, it can put you back a few steps was a thought that Hannah shared in her experience when asked about what trauma healing means for her:

I don't see it straight from getting worse to better. It's kind of two steps forward one step back kind of. And I don't think you're ever healed, you just deal with it better. I see it as a life-long thing.

Sometimes it was a wish that there was an end though for Jessica, she recognized that even seven years later she still is working on the effects of the abuse: "I wish I could see an end... I wish. It's lifelong healing. We haven't been together for 6 ½ years and I still have days where I cater a pity party."

For three of the co-researchers, their experience with abuse is something they said will need lifelong healing whether directly triggered or going through the effects of the abuse; whereas Jackie felt that this research project was the last step in her healing from the relationships she experienced 14 years ago. However, she also identified a need for life-long healing for the self:

It's lifelong healing. I do believe this [interview] is the last healing point of this issue for me, is doing this with you. I honestly believe and that's why I got a hold of you because my guides are saying yep this is it, this is where it ends. And I do believe this is my last step and it's the last thing I had to do. So, there will be other instances in my life that I will have to heal from and I know I can. But for this part of my life, it's over.

Identification of the life-long process of healing was important to the growth and learning that these women experienced through their abuse. Healing is an ongoing process for all

of them, whether directly related to the relationships they were in, or in other aspects of their lives.

In this phase of the healing journey, which could be recognized as the beginning of the healing, there was significant learning the co-researchers went through. At this stage, the co-researchers began the process of re-building themselves; finding their own identities and showing others the strength they possess. In re-building, counselling, new relationships and nature were significant contributors. The recognition of life-long journey of healing was presented. Though certain chapters of their lives may be closed, there is a sense of ongoing healing in their lives. The reconnection with nature as an aspect of the healing journey occurred through remembering experiences with nature from their youth. These memories created a sense of nostalgia for the positivity they experience in nature.

I remember when. As the stories of the co-researchers' experiences began to unfold, there was a similarity in their prior experiences with nature. All the co-researchers remembered times in their youth when they spent time in nature with their families, some of the co-researchers recalled having mindful reflections on being a youth in nature. These youth experiences laid the foundation for them to reintegrate with nature as adults. A couple of the co-researchers spoke of their experiences with a nostalgic sense of missing something integral from their lives. Sometimes these occurrences of remembering created a choice point; where they decided to engage in nature rather than in the previously mentioned negative coping. Remembering fond memories of spending time in the outdoors, whether for fun or for release of emotions, helped the co-researchers

to bring themselves back into nature following the domestic violence relationships they experienced.

Youth experiences. The experiences that the co-researchers had in their youth, either with family or by themselves, tended to be positive memories they had, which they fondly looked back on when discussing the process of their nature experiences following the relationships. Marie explained her time in youth with her parents:

Like I would always go on walks with my mom and dad when I was young and those were always really positive times. [...] My mom used to kick us [her and her sister] out of the car, when we were like really young and make us go into the fields to moo at the sky and stuff until we would start to laugh and stop being jerks in the vehicle.

Having the connection in nature in her youth was a positive point for her to reconnect to nature in her adulthood. Jessica also emulated the importance of this past connection to nature and what brought her back into using nature for healing:

We love to go out to the mountains. I grew up in [an area where] all of those... the foothills have always been really homey space for me. If I get sort of really upset we will go for drives and that's sort of the spot I'll beeline is to those foothills [where I grew up]. [...] One day I was like let's go for a drive and I went into those foothills and was just sort of like "Oh. Sigh." It's nice back here and it brought back memories.

Some of the experiences talked about by the co-researchers and their youth experiences related more to where they grew up; rural areas, where they could be in nature in their daily lives. Jessica commented on a particular area she remembered, which she started

going back to as an adult following her abusive relationship, while Jackie also talked about growing up in nature, which was connected to her ability to use nature even in the midst of the relationships: “I think in my heart I always knew I needed nature. I always have. I mean, I just did. We grew up on a farm so I mean I had it all around me.”

Finally, Hannah’s experience involved the activities she participated in while in nature; sports and taking walks with her parents. She connected this past experience with her current nature healing in why she finds certain aspects of nature healing for herself: “When I was a kid I used to play soccer and have camp on the grass so it’s [feeling grass] really calming for me.”

These youth experiences in nature lead the co-researchers back into reintegrating themselves into nature; from there, they began participating in more diverse ways, and finding different benefits for themselves in their healing. Sometimes the remembering of youth experiences created a sense of nostalgia; missing something that they once had.

Nostalgia. Nostalgia is defined as a “positively toned evocation of a lived past” (Davis, 1979, as cited in Wildschut, Sedikides, & Arndt, 2006). The experience of nostalgia is to look back on a memory that you have experienced fondly, and to have a sense of loss, or a want to re-create the past experience. The co-researchers showed a sense of loss when discussing some of the memories they had in their youth. Jackie talked about how people in general forget about fond youth experiences, and the need to bring them back into our lives:

People forget... when you were a kid did you ever sit ... and look at the clouds and watch the shapes... as adults we forget to take that one little moment out of our day to do it. My dad, because I was talking to them while writing about it in

my second book and him and mom went fishing and he looked up and like...Jackie's right, look at that there. In the boat fishing, cloud surfing. [...] But people forget it's not just nature... kids these days are missing out on so much with technology. They're not even appreciating what is outside their door. When we grew up that's all we had and we forget to do it. We get wrapped up in being busy and living that we forget to live.

This idea of being busy and living our daily lives without living was a profound statement Jackie continued discussing. All other co-researchers also mentioned the need to turn away from technology, and there is a note about this particular theme, as it is not directly related to the topic at hand, in the section on other findings, below. The sense of nostalgia was not lost on Jessica, either, who recalled a particular memory she had:

Yeah and those sounds that you remember... I would have a flashback of sitting in the backseat with all the windows down and it was really hot, no ac; but hearing that snap underneath the tires and seeing the scenery and there was no video games or anything so you just looked out the car windows and all of that was just part of Sunday afternoon and it's just a moment when things stood still when I was a kid and nothing was busy and dad wasn't at work and mom wasn't at work and we were just there.

Jackie continued to explain that following this flashback of memory is what lead her to making the choice to go back into nature and the importance of nature for herself.

Making the choice. This recollection of memories from youth of participating in nature with family or by themselves, and the nostalgia associated, created an opportunity for some of the co-researchers to make the choice to go back to their roots; include nature

back into their lives, following the feelings of being shut in through their relationship experiences. Jessica, as mentioned just above, recalled a fond memory from her childhood, and following this memory, she made the choice to experience nature once more through various environments that she had previously found enjoyable:

That's when I was sort of like wow, we need to get out of the house and we need to go to the Crowsnest pass, we need to go to Waterton, we need to go even to fort MacLeod and go to the museum or go to Drumheller. So we started to go places.

For Jackie, nature was always the choice in how to cope with her experiences, whereas, as presented earlier, for other participants it was an active process to make the choice between negative coping patterns and stepping into nature. Marie reflected:

There's been other moments where I've been drawn into nature where it's like I can feel like I'm over-activated and instead of wanting to smoke pot or do something like that that's when I'm drawn out there and that's when it's really good for me.

Jessica's experience of choosing nature was similar to Marie's:

If it's in home I tend to medicate in destructive ways. And for me it's food. And so I will go to the cupboard and eat an entire large bag of chips. And a carton of ice cream. To medicate. Where if you're in nature, you don't need that.

Each of the co-researchers experienced shifts in their choices to include nature into their healing practises, for various reasons and due to different youth experiences. Hannah described her re-integration with nature as being directed by a group counselling experience:

A lot of it was like meditating and they would give us tips for like going for walks and stuff and one of my favorite exercises was like closing your eyes and visualizing you were on like mountains so it was very nature based.

Clearly, all the co-researchers made a decision as some point following or during their relationships to use nature as part of the healing journey. The second phase of *Time for Me*, which then informs the third phase which will be discussed later, was the process of healing for the co-researchers from their relationships. This healing process of the trauma or abuse they experienced, was multi-faceted and not only included nature, but also included counselling, new positive and healthy relationships, and family involvement.

Now let's move towards the final phase, and the phase that integrates the experiences from the relationships, the process of re-building and the roles that nature played in the journey for these women.

Phase Three: The Way It's Supposed to Be

The final phase of the healing journey experience for co-researchers was where the most benefit and meaning was derived from. At this stage, the co-researchers were all out of the abusive relationships for a long time; most noting at least two years past the end of the relationship, and provided rich descriptions of the experience in nature that have helped them in their healing journeys. Four major themes emerged from this phase, and it was the most impactful part of each the co-researchers' healing journeys. First, the theme *A Place for Family*, where the co-researchers discussed their experiences in nature with others—children, family, new significant others. Within this theme, co-researchers found that the experiences of nature they had in a social setting had importance in three areas. The first sub-theme, *Bonding and Connection*, is comprised of descriptions of how

nature gave them an opportunity to feel a true sense of connection with their loved ones. Next, *Fun Times*, involves descriptions of the relaxation and fun they had with their family members in nature. Finally, *Passing on Memories* represents a particularly significant theme, as co-researchers described creating a continuation process from their own childhood memories that led them back to nature, to creating new memories by incorporating nature into their family lives.

The next theme, *A Sanctuary*, was a deeply impactful theme that emerged from the data. The co-researchers found a different experience, a more personal one, when using nature as a pathway to recovery from the abusive relationship. Nature played the role of a safe space for co-researchers, where they could reflect and process. The sub-theme of *Releasing All Emotions*, played a large role in the meaning making of how nature is impactful for them. *Mindfulness* was also discussed, and the healing aspects of nature as a grounding and calming source. Finally, there was the *Give and Take of Energy* that created meaning for the co-researchers, in nature.

The third theme, *All Senses Experience*, brings out *The Calmness of a Full Experience*, where co-researchers found peace and clarity when they participated in all ways in nature, using all senses. There were various experiences of *Touching Nature*, *Smell Bringing Relaxation*, *Seeing Something More* and *Hearing Everything and Nothing*.

Finally, the fourth and last theme in this phase may have been the one that related most to the second research question; “What meanings (if any) do these women make of their experiences?” The theme of *Freedom and Openness* was a final point in the journey they traveled. In contrast to the first phase of *Shut In*, in this final phase, the *Freedom and*

Openness provided to them by nature was overwhelming. The ideas of *Spirituality* came into play, as well as the idea of something *Greater Than Self*. Nature provided them a place of *No Judgement* where they can feel safe. Healing was found through nature.

Before reflecting on the narratives of these themes, it's important to identify that the co-researchers participated in nature in a variety of ways. All co-researchers mentioned spending time walking or biking outside, camping or hiking in the wilderness, swimming, looking out windows, picnics and time at the park, exploring neighbourhoods and going to the mountains and coulees. The specific types of environments they participated in ranged from green spaces within urban areas (e.g. city lakes or parks, zoos, botanical gardens), to rural farmland, the foothills and mountain ranges. The activities were diverse, and sometimes related to whether they were with family or on their own. The specific nature environments did not matter in their experiences of connecting to nature, themselves or others. The co-researchers' identified that all experiences in nature, whether urban or rural; with others or alone; allowed them to derive similar meanings and elicited the same powerful emotions.

Table 3

Phase Three: The Way It's Supposed to Be

<u>Themes</u>	<u>Sub-themes</u>
A Place for Family	Bonding and Connection Fun Times Passing on Memories
A Sanctuary	Releasing All Emotions Mindfulness The Give and Take of Energy

All Senses Experience: The Calmness of a Full Experience	Touching Nature Smell Brings Relaxation Seeing Something More Hearing Everything and Nothing
Freedom and Openness	No Judgement Greater Than Self Spiritual Connection

A place for family. There was an interesting distinction that the co-researchers made between how they participated in nature. The experiences they had were split between when they were with others, and when they were by themselves. The experiences they had with others included significant others, children, parents and friends. These experiences in nature with others had several different meanings for the co-researchers and involved various activities. There was a sense of using nature as a place for bonding and connecting with those closest to them. Other times the co-researchers reflected on the fun that it brought them; having a place to play and enjoy themselves and there was a sense of passing on memories to their children or family members that those can then look back on as adults.

The significance of the use of nature as a place for family was important in that it provided the co-researchers with a place they did not have to think, or focus on the difficulties they were experiencing in their healing. It was a way of creating something new for themselves.

Bonding and connection. Nature has been discussed as a place of connection to oneself and others, as well as with the environment for centuries (West, 2004). It's no surprise that the co-researchers in this study also found nature to be a place of connection.

The theme of having a place for family signified a connection to others in various ways. Marie discussed how she often finds rocks and collects them to do art work with, and that this activity for her is a connection to members of her family:

I try to use it [nature] in a lot of different ways. I love doing art with rocks and elements. I'm always picking up random rocks because I think they carry energies and you can put energy into them and it's a connection with my mom because she's an artist that works with that too. [...] When I'm finding rocks that I love it's anytime where I'm near rock piles I'm looking down but I think that's just my connection to my mom and the art we do.

It's clear that Marie's experience in nature of collecting rocks and other elements helps her feel a deeper connection with her mom over their shared experience of doing art work with natural elements. Other co-researchers discussed connections with their children. For Jackie, she connects with her children through mutually enjoyable activities such as hiking. She relates her connection to her kids in nature as enjoying the time she has with them:

When you're with your kids, especially because they're getting older, you take every minute you can because they're going to leave me and go on with their own lives, like my twins are turning 20 on the 13th. They're eventually going to leave me so I enjoy my kids as much as I can.

Enjoying children in nature experiences is a positive memory that both Jackie and Jessica have:

They're [nature experiences with children] always so positive. Those are the ones where we're just in a good mood and we're going to go out and explore, we're

going to find a pathway and we're just using it as family bonding time and as building memories and experiences together. I use it [nature] for bonding with my kids.

Connecting to others through nature and creating stronger bonds in shared experiences was important to the co-researchers in multiple ways. Hannah also discussed nature with family, but related her experiences more related to having fun and doing mutually enjoyable activities.

Fun times. Nature does not always have to be about connection and bonding with others, but sometimes the shared experience in the outdoors just leads to having fun; enjoying yourself and having a place to unwind with family. Hannah spoke of this when she discussed participating in activities both her and her fiancé and/or mom enjoy:

My fiancé and I over the summer went for walks in [the] park. Not pretty often, but often. We went for bike rides. [...] My mom took me to Banff over the summer. I love Banff. Going to the hot springs was really great.

Having shared activities is a way for some to have fun in nature, for others it's about sharing a laugh with family members, as Marie pointed out: "I would go out with my mom and sister and now we just scream out into the coulees, and try to teach them [releasing emotions]." This process of going into the coulees with her mom and sister, related to the earlier shared experience of releasing emotions in the vehicle with her family, which allowed room for laughter in shared experiences.

Whether laughing or sharing mutually enjoyable experiences, sometimes particular memories stuck out for the co-researchers about the fun they experience in nature with children. Jackie recalled particular fond experiences she had with her kids:

But I love to hike, my kids love to hike, water fights. Glacier. Went hiking through glacier and we stopped for a picnic near the creeks there and we got into this unbelievable water fight. Like I said I have good kids, just they're mean to me sometimes. I had these water guns, just these little pump little things, they go in the creek and they actually ended up throwing me in. They're bigger than me now... so yeah they threw me in. And so Harley decides to join the fight. They threw her in and she goes "Mom!" I said didn't you see them throw the mom in, what did you think made you safe? You're the sister!

Sharing fun with children is a time for relaxing and doing something together. Jessica reflected that she also enjoys her time with the children: "We spend a fair bit of time in the [mountains] this summer. Picnics, eating out doors; we spend a lot of time just going out. Whatever we can do, we do." Sharing experiences with others not only connected some co-researchers to family members and provided them with a place to have fun, but it also created an opportunity to pass along memories of nature to family members. This idea was connected with their own experience in youth and how connected they felt to nature growing up.

Passing on memories. Memories of nature are something all the co-researchers had from their own youth experiences. Thus, the two co-researchers who have children of their own at this point, felt the importance that their time with family in nature also created memories for their children to look back on. Jessica talked about how she wishes her kids would look back:

So we're going to [National Park] and we're hiking a trail and we're finding a waterfall and we're having really great family experiences that they can ... when

they think about their childhood they can think... yeah mom took us a lot of places and remember that waterfall that we found.

Having nature experiences to look back on for their children created that ability to have family experiences in nature. For Jackie, as her kids are older now, she can already see how her kids fondly remember nature experiences they had with her growing up:

I'd just drive all of us to the beach. [...] My kids insisted I tried to drown them but I was just teaching them to respect that piece of water because I have no control. If you ask the boys... you tried to drown us! Took them out there and waited for the biggest wave and then I let them go. It's out of your hands! They still talk about that.

The ability to spend time with family, whether with children, significant others or reflecting on shared experiences with parents, was important to the participants. Nature was a place they could find connection to others through art, or shared hobbies. It was a place they could unwind and have fun. Nature is also somewhere they could pass on experiences to their own children, since their youth experiences played a big role in their own lives.

The experiences that all the co-researchers had with others were uplifting and joyous events that they can look back on fondly. These were times that they didn't have to think or feel anything in particular related to the abuse they've experienced. This was a time to relax. Nature was not only used for these purposes, however. For all the co-researchers, a lot of healing and growth occurred in their experiences of nature on their own. There was a sense of empowerment and ability to process emotions, ground

themselves and connect more deeply to themselves when they were on their own. Nature became their safe space; their sanctuary.

A sanctuary. Spending time alone in nature has multiple benefits that have been studied as part of wilderness therapy for various populations. The experiences of being alone in nature have shown to have effects of empowerment and gaining confidence in oneself when faced with difficult challenges. These experiences have allowed individuals to feel more in tune with themselves. The co-researchers in this study discussed at length their own personal experience in nature and the effects nature had on the healing of their abusive relationships as well as the power nature has to allow them the space to process their emotions.

Being alone in nature, the co-researchers experienced safety to explore. This safety they felt and the process of having that space was important for them. Nature gives some people the sense of comfort and safety that they need in order to process, explore and relax. For Jackie, she sees nature as a place she could always turn to: “I find that nature helps me focus and find the true answers I’m seeking... Nature brings a sense of inner peace that I can not find anywhere else.” A place that can bring a sense of inner peace; how important that may be to someone, especially coming from relationships where there was little to no inner peace. Marie says that everything originally came from nature, so it only makes sense that it can provide you with whatever you need:

And I always like reflecting on how much you can get from that [nature]. This is weird but how life is now all modern, all these materials we have now. Not everybody had that forever but it all came from nature. Not everything but all of

these things came from elements. So there is so much it can give to you in so many different way

Not only does nature give everything to an individual, it can also just in its essence, provide hiding space, as Jessica put it:

And sometimes I know... if I know I'm expecting a phone call and I'm trying to avoid it I'm like... okay, let's go! Turn the phone off... and it can be like hiding. It's pretty easy to feel lost and hidden in the mountains. It's been my getaway. It has been my hiding space. [...]In Alberta, there is so much that you can actually think in your mind, so much area in Alberta that is probably not had a footstep in 20 years. And you think about all these places that people have not even accessed and there's just so much untouched that you could even go into the Crowsnest pass and go off a trail and think I wonder how long it's been since someone has stood here. And that's really calming for me to think that I can find a space that is unclaimed and it's just me for now and it feels like my little secret. It's nice to have that.

It's the idea that nature can be a place to go to on their own, where they have their own space to use nature in whatever way they need. In summation, Jessica said: "It's safe... it's like I said it's just safe."

Not only did nature provide the space they needed to feel at ease, but nature played a role in allowing them a place for releasing the emotions they experience, in various ways. Mindfulness was also a large component of the time they spent outdoors; there was a deep sense of grounding and calmness they received in nature. Finally, in their sanctuaries, they discussed the ability of nature to give and take energy from them.

Not only could they unleash their emotion, but they would also gain something from their experiences that effected their healing significantly.

Releasing all emotions. Releasing emotions in nature was an integral part of nature being a sanctuary for the co-researchers. There were many ways that nature opened up the space for them to process their emotions. Several of the co-researchers discussed the ability to release their emotions in a physical way; through using elements of nature. Hannah talked about how she uses tactile things in nature to have a physical release of anxiety:

When it comes to tactile, like throwing rocks or anything, I sort of channel negative feelings into the physical object, or channel anxiety into it. Like if I'm sitting on the ground just drawing in the dirt with a stick, sometimes I'll push the stick deep into the dirt, sort of as a physical release.

This physical release was something Jessica and Marie also experienced. For Jessica, she used elements in nature to release some of her emotions as well:

Where if you're in nature, you don't need that [unhealthy coping strategies]. You can just sit and cry for a little bit. Throw some rocks. Kick a stick. Just let her rip. Throw a rock. It doesn't care. I'm not hurting anyone if I throw a rock there. If I throw a rock in my house... probably not the best idea... but out there you can do those things like throw a rock... and it's okay.

Using nature elements can be a release of emotions, but nature itself and the safety it provides can also be the space needed to just release any emotions the co-researchers have been holding in. Marie described a situation that she felt was a positive release of emotions:

In the experience when I was at school and I was having an overwhelming sensation like getting completely out of my window of tolerance, and then when I went to with my friend who's a counsellor come with me out to the hill and to have that person with me who's supporting me and very understanding about it, and caring and participating with me, there was such a massive shift in this hammed up painful energy emotions of sadness and rage and confusion, to just like let out these screams that I have never heard my body produce ever and give that out to the coulees and kind of hear it reverberate, and to do that with another person immediately it unblocked me and my emotions felt way more positive and even though the issue brought me out there is still something that I work with, it was like letting up containing it.

This ability to unleash rage, confusion and sadness was important for Marie, and something that she felt unblocked her from being able to move forward with the issue that she was holding onto. Jessica also uses nature in a similar way to unleash her own sadness:

It can be a good crying space. If only a squirrel is seeing you cry (laughs) it's okay to be vulnerable there. You don't have an audience, it's not like when you're driving in your car down 3rd ave, if you're crying there's people that are like oh my gosh what's with the lady in the car... but it's okay to just sit and bawl in nature and because I have a hard time expressing feelings and I'm a suppressor. I stuff it down and have to pretend smile. And I don't have to do that if I can go and hide. If I want to bawl my face off I don't feel okay doing that just sitting in my house.

It's this idea that the safety that nature provides gives these individuals the space to feel their emotions and unleash them out into nature, and not have to hold onto things longer than they were. Jackie sums up this idea by stating it helps her clear things out: "When I'm alone in nature I'm allowed to get lost in my own thoughts, to find clarity and clear all the garbage out."

Clearing out the mind and body of emotion either from issues they were dealing with or ongoing anxiety in life; nature provided them a space to be able to let go, without having to worry about what the stick, rock or squirrel might think. On the other hand, nature doesn't always have to be a place of unleashing emotions; it can also be a place of calmness and grounding.

Mindfulness. Having a sanctuary of space where one can relax and unwind was important to the co-researchers. A commonality among all four women was the grounding and calming that nature could provide them in times of high anxiety or stress. Marie reflected on the newest part of her healing journey:

There's been a few moments of just being by myself in nature and breathing but those are farther apart from each other and pretty new in my healing journey so I can definitely see it being a more stable thing that I can engage in all by myself soon. [...] There's this slowing down and appreciating...

No matter the specific activity, the concept of just slowing down was something that Hannah enjoyed about nature as well:

Even just sitting here and looking outside. Whenever I'm doing homework I like to sit in urban market and sit by the windows and even in my apartment, there's windows everywhere and I like to sit by the window. If I'm on campus where I

feel pretty safe then it's really relaxing, same with when I'm at home. And even driving. I used to drive to Calgary over the summer like once a week so I love that drive. I find it really calming and it's kind of nice to just focus on one thing. Even right now I keep looking at that tree and thinking oh I wonder what kind of animals live in there. Things like that. I find it really calming.

Having a calming place to let go of thoughts and the busyness of life can be beneficial in many ways. Jackie made a comment about the peacefulness of nature that was profound for her experience:

Nature is one of the most healing energies out there. You just have to stop. So many people get busy and so wrapped up in ... just stop and look. Peace, serenity, just a calmness... there's ... if you stop and listen and feel it's just... the way it's supposed to be. It's clarity.

An ongoing pattern of nature as calming and mindful was seen through talking with the co-researchers. Jessica noted that she's tried being mindful in other situations but it just wasn't the same as the calmness she gets in nature:

I have a hard time calming my mind so that's why I have to physically go to it because I'm really not able to block out the chaos, to block out the thoughts and probably if I was accessing medications to calm my adhd I probably would be able to do that more. I've even tried mindfulness of here's yours grape and bite the grape slowly and it just... it kills me every time but if I'm physically inside a natural setting it's very easy and then the thoughts to seem to organize themselves from being random to being linear and I can actually sort through them. And I

don't know why it is that that happens... but I tried meditation, I've tried yoga, I've tried all that stuff and it just kills me. I can't calm my mind enough to do it. It's clear that the perspectives of the co-researchers is that nature can provide a sense of clarity, peace and calmness into their everyday lives, and can help them sort of various thoughts they might be experiencing.

In spending time in nature on their own, the final most important aspect of their sanctuaries, was this idea of how nature plays a role with energy.

Give and take of energy. As we have already explored and continue to do so, the idea of energy as related to nature has come up at several points. The ability of nature to take negative energy and give back something positive was important to the co-researchers for their healing. Marie defined the way that nature gives and takes energy:

This huge space that you can let go of your energy to. Almost like how trees clean the air and give the oxygen back, it's like they can clean your energy and give you this revitalized feeling back. I've been learning to use nature as a spot to put that energy or cleanse that energy. So that's when I've found it to be most beneficial and what kind of draws me out there.

Having negative energy within themselves or the environment and having nature turn it into something more revitalized and invigorating is something Jessica felt she experiences as well:

It can be invigorating if you're kind of slouchy and not feeling good you can go outside and maybe it's a nice sunny day and you're like oh look. It can be like okay I'm not feeling crappy and just sitting on the couch today, I'm actually out and we're doing something really neat and it brings a lot of energy. If I'm going

on a quest because I'm on the couch and just feeling sorry for myself let's just go out, then I'll come out feeling... I use it as a therapy. I'm feeling crappy so I go out knowing I'm going to get some energy. [...] It just brings... elevates and you go from a 3/10 for mood and I don't have energy and why am I even up and you see that and you're an 8/10 and go that's why I'm up.

Though both Marie and Jessica experienced the give and take of energy in a general sense from nature, Jackie broke down the different aspects of nature and how they can recycle negative energy into positive energy:

And the ocean is amazing. Absolutely ... such healing water, you can't even imagine. The energy and the healing in it. [...] People come in [to her home] and are like 'Am I in a jungle' No, but it's really healthy for you. It's very healing, just try it. So yeah, I do... because plants ... can help absorb negative energy in your home, and clear it... [...] I tell them [clients] if they can't figure out how to ground, I make them physically go hug a tree and let the tree take that from you. And the tree will ground you... it will help get rid of that energy that has got to get away from you.

She continued to discuss various elements of nature and the ways they could be energy clearing, but she also was able to discuss her own experience of nature and give and take of energy in a more general sense:

I relax. I absolutely... I know how to let the earth absorb everything from me. That's what's called the grounding. I feel at peace again. Just calming. Just know things will work out, no matter what is going on, it will work out. Nature will do it. It's the stress. It'll take all your stresses. It clears your mind so you can

actually think straight because it just get so congested with this and that and I mean, you can feel it coming at you just like that and you go out in nature and there's none of that.

Clearly, there are benefits to the co-researchers in having a give and take energy relationship with nature where it provides them with a space that they can let go of negative energies.

Nature as a sanctuary for the co-researchers has given them a place to go in order to hide and feel safe; it provided them with a place to release emotions whether that be anger, sadness or uncertainty. It's always been a place that they could rely on or begin to rely on for breathing room, to relax and calm themselves, and it's something that takes their negative energies and replenishes them with invigorating, revitalizing and grounding energies.

In experiencing nature, the co-researchers made significant comments regarding the importance of the different senses in nature. At this point, we will look over the commonalities of experience of nature through all the senses; which is the third theme of this phase.

All senses experience: The calmness of a full experience. In the nature experiences that the co-researchers had, the use of all the senses was an important factor in the healing journey. Using their senses to experience various activities in nature, whether alone or with others brought continued feelings of calming to the co-researchers. Elements of nature whether on their own or as part of the whole picture of nature, allowed them to feel connected to themselves, others and their surroundings. The combination of using all the senses provided grounding to the co-researchers. Hannah and

Jessica both experienced the grounding effects of using sensory interventions in nature. Hannah explained: “When I do go for a walk I like to do the 5 things I see, smell, hear, touch... sort of thing. That grounding exercise, like the 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. It’s grounding for me.” The grounding exercise of 5 things you see, 4 things you smell, etc. was something Jessica mentioned that she does in nature with her children in a slightly different way: “We’ll schedule things like scavenger hunt in the river bottom and we need to find 3 different flowers, 2 different animal tracks... and then it can be invigorating.” Sharing the sensory experience with others can be beneficial for others healing as well, as Jackie discussed in how she uses a full sensory experience with her clients/students:

I’ll pick different leaves from different trees, I’ll get different flowers, I have seashells I brought from Australia in a zip lock bag, because you get different smells and I ask my students to use their senses... like touch, smell, taste, and try to figure out what it is that I put in their hands. Just because it helps you grow.

In combining all the senses, this grounding and invigorating feeling left, was important to the co-researchers experiences. Most of them discussed the senses more separately, and specifically. Breaking down the theme of senses into the various components, allows room for the rich descriptions of the co-researchers narratives.

Touching nature. Nature provides a variety of different opportunities for those exploring it, and one of the ways to explore is tactile. All the co-researchers in this study, identified ways in which they were able to participate in touching nature. For some, touch was more important than the other senses. Marie discussed her experience in touching nature: “I love, sounds weird, but hugging trees and putting my hands on trees. [...] You can find rocks and have this good energy or bad energy, you can throw them or keep

them. You can shake a tree.” Hannah also enjoys the tactile part of nature and finds her experiences to be very grounding and calming, which she related to her youth experiences playing soccer:

We like to walk and sit for a bit, then we’ll go up to the water, look at it and throw rocks in the water so it’s very tactile. I like to experience it, not just sit in it. I like to touch it, and be a part of it. If I am really anxious and I have the opportunity to, I’ll go and sit on the grass and feel the grass.

Experiencing nature and not just being in it can be a powerful tool in grounding oneself when feeling anxious or stressed. As mentioned earlier, but expanded on now; Jackie discussed the book she wrote and how she teaches others to experience nature and touch nature:

And hugging a tree it’s one thing I teach people, in spirituality and I tell them if they can’t figure out how to ground, I make them physically go hug a tree and let the tree take that from you. And the tree will ground you... it will help get rid of that energy that has got to get away from you. And I talk about it, tell people in the book, 3 ways to hug a tree.

Touching nature, and more specifically perhaps related to trees and rocks in nature, can be grounding and healing for the co-researchers. For Hannah, it was the most important of her senses, to be able to touch and experience. For others, smell was more important.

Smell brings relaxation. Smell played a large role in the experiences of the co-researchers in how they participate in nature. Different seasons were mentioned as different smells arise moving from season to season. Fire, or grass was also a common

factor in how important smell was to the co-researchers. For Jackie, her experiences of smell in nature was important in that it provides deeper energy healing for her:

The pine trees. Um, freshly mowed grass and brought down fields. I mean, I have allergies but I'll sit there and go (sniffs loudly) and stuff myself up for a year. It smells so good. But they can't bottle that. Different seasons have different smells if you really pay attention. There are different smells in every season. Because your flowers start dying do you don't get the aroma of the flowers being out, so it turns into your leaves and your fall. You almost get a musty smell because your leaves start to turn to rot if it's moist out. [...] Then I'll throw dry herbs in [to the fire] just to change the scent. Oh heavens. Throw in a bit of lavender, some sage, some camomile oh. The different aromas you get off that fire are amazing.

Lavender is probably one of your best. Sage is the best for protection and healing.

Lavender is good for stress.

Smell can bring relaxation and calming sensations and some found it very grounding.

Hannah shared in this experience: "I'll go outside and I'll just breathe and just smell nature. Freshly cut grass or leaves or something. It's just grounding for me." Smelling fresh cut grass in the summer, or the leaves in the fall can have strong impacts on the healing process. Furthering the senses experience, the co-researchers discussed paying attention to the things around them and really seeing beyond what was readily visible.

Seeing something more. Being able to really see nature, was an aspect of participation that was interesting to gather from the co-researchers. Seeing something is an opportunity to really pay attention and focus on the small details around. This facet of the sensory experience could also be tied into the next theme as well, but for now let's

explore the simplicity in seeing nature. Marie gave several examples of how she pays attention to nature around her:

You can appreciate mom bird with her babies [...] Even visually you can also see things like the veins in the leaf [...] How much energy went into developing into the one little leaf that's so beautiful. You know you can zoom in or zoom right out and it's just kind of whatever you make of it.

Zooming in and out of nature to see the finer details of various elements, or looking at the bigger picture is something Jackie mentioned in her own experiences:

Nature is one of the most healing energies out there. You just have to stop. So many people get busy and so wrapped up in ... just stop and look. Like I can look out here (window) and the things I see... I know people aren't seeing them.

Slowing down and paying attention are two facets of using sight in nature that provided co-researchers with a calming over them. Jessica noted briefly a specific event she may watch:

"Noticing the geese are right there so you're quiet and you can watch the geese and you're calming. I do feel a connection with beautiful scenery." Really taking the time to notice the smaller details in nature created a space for calmness and grounding for the co-researchers.

Not only did the co-researchers speak of really seeing more of nature, but the final part of the sensory experience for them was the ability to hear. This part of the senses was spoken of frequently, and seems to be a vital tenant of the whole experience.

Hearing everything and nothing. As we explored the ability of nature to show the co-researchers perhaps more than the reality of nature, the sound of nature struck a

certain chord with them. There was a lot of various sounds, yet similar among these four women, which they found comforting and calming. For Jessica, she related the sounds of things to her childhood; when she would be driving with her family to go to the foothills or mountains:

There's something for me about the snap of the gravel underneath the tires that's... comparable to the tapping of rain on the top of tent. Those two noises immediately bring calm for me. And it's just amazing what it does for my spirit. Just calms my head and my body calms. It's unbelievable what it does. Just listen to the gravel snap under the tires... And sound of running water. Love that.

Jessica discussed the calming effects for her of the sounds that she enjoys about nature, and later in her interview, she discussed how sound could be beneficial working on trauma experiences:

If we know that sound of running water is a calming issue and you're trying to deal with really traumatic issues, it might be a good thing to sit near running water, to help calm. To help work past those things. [...] Maybe there's settings that are relaxing to a person, maybe like a waterfall and you can go to a place with that... the sound of the running water is relaxing and calming and if you're working on a trauma maybe you can maybe that's a spot.

Having therapy working on trauma issues while having calming and relaxing nature sounds could be an important aspect to consider in the counselling field, which will be discussed later in the next chapter. For Jessica, she identified that something like this could be beneficial for her own processing. Similarly, Jackie also found that sound can be a grounding experience and more specifically, can give her focus. Her experiences with

sound relate to fire: “The dancing, the movements, the smell. It’s majestic. It’s mesmerizing and it’ll help you clear your mind too. Fire can be dangerous but I love it. The sound, when it’s crackling.” Specifically related to how she used nature while still in the relationships, she identified that hearing her children and the nature around them made things okay. She had commented that coping with the relationship by listening to the sounds of the ocean roar helped her to know she could make it through another day.

The sound of water seemed to come up at several points for various co-researchers, as a pathway to calmness and relaxation. Marie commented:

A bunch of ways, like running water, the sound of running water is one of the most calming things to me ever. To sit by a river, or anything, even a storm drain.

You can hear the water running in there or something so calming about that.

The co-researchers fully engaged in nature in multiple ways; using all their senses to participate as deeply as they could. Heightened senses in nature allowed them to have feelings of calmness, clarity and relaxation, which was important for them in their journey.

Finally, we move to the fourth and last theme of phase three, where most meaning was derived for the co-researchers. The freedom and openness nature provides can be truly healing; especially from the positions of these co-researcher, coming from abusive environments.

Freedom and openness. Having freedom was an integral component in the co-researchers experience of healing. Due to the nature of being in abusive relationships, their desire to have space for themselves and the ability to explore was hugely important. Nature provided them with a space where they could be free of the restrictions they felt in

their relationships. Most often, their freedom and place of openness was not experienced fully until almost years following the relationships with domestic violence. Having nature provide this vast openness and freedom was one of the most meaningful experiences they had. Marie contributed her thoughts to this idea, having experienced physical confinement in the abusive relationship, nature gave her the freedom she desired: “Just the openness and the freedom of it [nature], like there are no walls holding you into a certain spot and that just the expansiveness of that of the physical place is healing for me, to not feel contained.” This experience of having space to not feel contained was not lost on Hannah:

Being in nature is allowing myself to open up to myself... I used to just be really scared of what intrusive thoughts would pop into my head but then kind of realizing I can deal with whatever comes. I've dealt with a lot already, I can deal with more, if I need to. Nature opened that for me.

A sense of having a place of no judgement was an important factor, whether in nature with a professional or on their own. Their view of nature specifically, was that as it exists, it is a place of no judgement. Two of the co-researchers found not necessarily a spiritual connection to nature, but rather of being a part of something greater than themselves, while the other two co-researchers found both a connection to spirituality and a connection of greater than self.

No judgement. Part of the experience of feeling free and open was the concept of no-judgement. As we explored earlier, there were multiple experiences that the co-researchers discussed of being free from judgement. Having a place to hide, unleash

emotions, with no one around or something supportive with them is the opportunity nature provided. Jessica spoke of this frequently:

It's safe... it's like I said it's safe. You can throw a rock, who cares. I guess that's something you can't do if you're in a quiet counseling room. You can't display your anger in a way that's physical. What can you do? If you feel angry in counselling [in nature]... maybe you can throw a rock, maybe you can kick a stick maybe you can yell at a tree... the tree doesn't care... I don't think. I haven't heard one yell back. Yeah it's just so, you can have any array of feelings there and I think what's nice is you can take that with you and you can be in a place you can return to on your own.

Incorporating nature with counselling was an important topic discussed with Jessica. Her own experiences in nature led her to feeling that the process of doing counselling in nature may be a better way of having people open up in discussing difficult topics:

I would be able to probably freely talk on a walk. It wouldn't be maybe as formal. Might not feel so... cause a lot of times it can feel so Freudian. "Let's talk about that... let's explore, exactly how did that happen" Maybe it would feel a little less Freudian if you were out on a walk. And you're walking say Henderson lake and relaxing it might encourage people to say things they might not normally say when they're in an interview or office setting. It might open them up.

Her opinions and own experience of being more open and free while in nature and how it may benefit others in counselling settings is something Jackie would agree with:

Well if people... even if they don't realize... weather permitting, in this area it's a little harder but if you could actually do a session sitting on the side of that hill...

they wouldn't even realize how much nature is taking from them and what they're getting from it. Without them even realizing it. It happens. If they take advantage. But from the counselor's point of view, if you said, lets meet here bring some sunglasses, some sunscreen and let's just sit outside and visit. You know, it would make a big difference in my opinion because people don't have to believe for it to happen. It just gives you whatever you need.

Opening up in nature can be difficult for some, but for others who had experienced it with friends or a professional, it opens the door to further experience. Marie reflects on a time when a fellow colleague in her therapy program supported her in releasing her emotions in nature and the healing and benefits that occurred for her from that experience:

Having that person with me doing that [screaming into the hills] with me and having this non-judgemental participant in it was helping me learn and guide my understanding of how I could use nature in a way. I had gone out and screamed before but nothing like that. Probably would have not have done that had I not had that kind of support. So there was this guidance and acceptance that didn't make me feel like an idiot. It was also like it's okay to use it [nature] this way so I think that having that initially and maybe even the last time when it was homework, having someone that was like not judging it, cause I wasn't emotionally engaged. My brain was saying a lot of judgemental stuff to me while I was screaming the first time where the second time my body was fully engaged, I was out of my window and I had somebody not judging me and encouraging that. I found it helpful but I don't think I would need it every single time. It was like an unblocking where I understood like oh this is not something stupid. I actually had

a huge impact on releasing all these emotions and energy and I could probably bring myself out there again.

Having no judgment from nature itself or those participating with the co-researchers was important for the growth and opportunity to seek nature again for themselves. There were experiences of negative association when some of the co-researchers did feel judgement from others, or had judgement of themselves in their experience of nature, that created a negative experience, which prevented them from going into nature again, for a time.

Marie explained her experience:

The negative part would be not going there authentically. Like trying to structure something, trying to recreate something. Trying to do an activity because you were told to do the activity versus that is something naturally came from yourself and just wanting to be immersed in nature and I find that can be confusing. I don't know if it's a damaging thing, I mean there was some shame I felt when people were staring at me [first experience out in nature releasing emotions] but I also made the choice to kind of put myself almost out in the middle of a lake. I wasn't in a secret place right but it's like... I think the intent of how you use it can confuse you and shut you down to the whole experience. Had I a positive experience the first time I was trying to bring myself out, maybe I would have been quicker to bring myself out, but because it was kind of embarrassing, I wasn't getting the point, I was confused by it, I think that probably jammed up me being naturally drawn to go back out there at first.

While going into nature authentically for yourself can be an important factor, Jessica commented on her first step into nature following her relationship to have created a negative association with a particular place:

For a couple of years. I probably didn't do a whole lot take the kids to the park every once in a while. Even that I still; maybe it was because of those memories of forcing myself to go out and take them to the park... I still don't like going to parks. So it took several years to get back to the point to just be like okay let's just go for a drive.

Nature being a space free of judgement to be able to experience freedom and openness was important to the co-researchers. When nature experiences were forced and not authentic or natural to what they were going through, it created negative associations and stunted the ability to go back into nature. Having authentic connections with the spaces they were going to, was huge for them.

Connecting to the experience of nature, and the freedom and space it provides was split between the co-researchers. For two of the co-researchers, their connection to nature was not spiritual, but rather it was seeing the bigger picture. It was about connecting to something greater than themselves. For the other two co-researchers, they found both a connection to spirituality and a connection to something greater than themselves.

Greater than self. The vagueness of something greater than the self is appropriately termed in this research, as for all the co-researchers, they could connect to an existential view of nature; of seeing the big picture of everything around them and their experience of it, but how they viewed the bigger picture was different for all of them. Connectively, they all shared experiences of really seeing beyond just the realities

of nature. Hannah described how she views nature: “When I see nature, I just see like how the tree grew from a seed to some big magnificent thing.” Her ability to look at nature and see how it grew from something so small to something so magnificent is a comment that Marie also made: “Putting my hands on trees and just thinking like how many centuries they’ve stood there, and how strong they are and what they’ve witnessed.” For Jessica, her experience was more looking at the big picture and seeing how vast and open the space is for her; connecting to the world around her:

Pictures of sunrises and you go outside and I’m making kids breakfasts and see that red pink sunrise that happens, its really lifting. You look and you go... that’s a cool start to the day. [...] I try to look for those moments like I said, when I am making lunches and I look out and see the sunrise and think oh look awesome. Or even when the forest fires were going and the sun was dark pink, and just looking at that and it’s so smoky but look how gorgeous that is. The days you’re driving to Calgary for an appointment and you can see the mountains oh look at how awesome that is. Or yellow fields of canola, or I just everything like that...

Connecting to something more than yourself can be vital for many people, and for Jackie, she found that her own clients/students through the work she was doing with them, found great peace in nature, which she consistently encourages:

She said [client] you know since coming to you I have found such peace in my life. I said isn’t it an amazing place to be. It’s there. People just look for it. No matter what you’ve been through. It’s there. Go find it. It’s right outside your door.

She continued to discuss the vastness of belonging to something more by sharing a trip she went on and her experience of the stars:

And it will just travel right around you, you can see it all. And it's amazing up there. And the stars, we were at a creek this year and it's like oh, I can see my stars. I just sat there for hours just staring at the stars and they're [children] going, what are you doing? Don't you see that?! Tell me you don't get it.

Finally, Jackie was able to connect her experience with nature and the greatest meaning she gets from it: "The greatest meaning and emotion I find in nature is peace, calm, stillness. A sense of belonging to something greater than I'll ever know." Belonging to something greater than she knows was a connection not just to something greater for her, but it was a direct connection to her understanding of spirituality and nature.

Spiritual connection. Nature has been seen to have many connections to spirituality since the beginning of time (West, 2004). For two of the co-researchers, their experience of freedom and openness in nature directly connected to the sense of spirituality they had. Marie described how her experience of nature relates to spirituality:

I see my spirituality and my energy as like very interconnected. [...] When I'm drawn to nature, or elements in nature that is spiritual to me and that ties to how it affects my energy. And also like with aboriginal cultures as I was drawn to that and knowing that plants have spirit and animals have spirit and there's all this spirit energy just so naturally interwoven into those environments and what lives in those environments like that's how I've been starting to form my own understanding. [...] I'm learning what it means for me. [...] It's the understanding that it's my spirituality and my connection to nature.

Beginning to create the foundation of spiritual understanding in nature is the process that Marie has taken in her nature participation, where for Jackie; who by trade is in the healing practices, she's been involved in the spirituality of nature for a long time:

Nature is so important and more people are actually turning to spirituality ... spirituality is nature based, they just didn't realize it until they start. Because of who I am and my spiritual nature, I did a lot of meditating, I did a lot of soul searching and a lot of walking.

Whether spiritual or a connection to something greater, Marie summarized the point of the experience: "If you believe in god, or spirits or science even, like the sun and the water, how much energy went into developing into the one little leaf that's so beautiful."

Nature can be whatever you make of it. For these four women, coming from their abusive relationships, the meaning behind being free and open in nature was huge. The opportunity to explore their environments, find their own paths to no-judgement and connection to spirit or science, or whatever they chose to believe in was something integral to their healing journeys.

Other Findings: Interconnected Beings

There were several other themes that came up for the co-researchers in terms of this study that did not fit the research questions being asked. However, it is important to note these areas, as they were commonalities for all the co-researchers.

Role of animals. The first theme in this section is the connection between animals and nature. When discussing their experiences in nature, love for animals and experience of animals was brought up at several points. At one point in Hannah's interview she stated:

I think another big factor for me is not just nature but actual animals. My fiancé takes me to the pet store all the time. To cuddle the bunnies and stuff. I find that very calming as well. And he actually got me gerbils and I think it's related to the nature aspect of it, I think it's a primitive feeling. We want to be outside, and we want to take care of smaller things. Stuff like that. That's been really grounding too.

This idea of animals being grounding was interesting and how she connected wanting to be outside with taking care of animals, prompted me to clarify about the primitive feeling of animals, she expanded:

In the sense that we want to care for those we deem as unable to care for themselves. For some reason, the idea of being responsible for another living thing keeps me calmer, or the idea that feeding wild animals maybe helps them survive one day longer. If I can help an animal survive, then I guess I feel like I have more of a purpose.

Jackie commented on animals during her interview, simply stating "I love animals; we have cats, dogs, birds, lizards... animals are animals." While discussing how she and her family participate in nature. As there seems to be some connection between the experiences of nature with the experience of animals, it may be worthwhile to look at the connection more in depth in future research.

Helping others. Another common factor to the co-researchers was the drive to help others in similar experiences of abusive relationships. Jackie discussed the individuals she works with through her healing practice and how her own experiences were a motivator for her to reach out to others.

They find me but that is my way of helping others get through. Pay back for what was given to me. To help others. That's why I said, I had to go through this, I know I did.

But that was for me to get stronger so I could help others.”

This concept of helping others due to their own experiences was a commonality among all the co-researchers. Using their own experiences for the growth and benefit of others. This could be an importance in support groups for domestic violence and help the counselling field understand better ways to support individuals going through abusive relationships.

New relationships. When the co-researchers' began to redefine the parameters of their life and the value of themselves, several themes of the process of *Re-building the Self* came out, which were unrelated to the particular research questions in this study, but were still important in the context of the co-researchers' experiences. For some, the majority of the re-building occurred through healthy new relationships. Hannah pointed to her new relationship as an experience of re-gaining her identity through her supportive partner:

I'm his first relationship too so he had a lot to deal with when we started seeing each other. But he's been really supportive throughout it all and he's really supportive in the bedroom. Like he's really um, I don't know what the word would be but he can connect to how I'm feeling. Even if I don't say it, he can read my face and body language really well. Like if I'm not into it he's not going to push it at all.

She was not the only one who had the support of a partner to help her process the experience, Marie explained:

When I was getting insecure because he would work away, he was man enough to sit me down and talk to me that this isn't how a relationship goes, it has to have trust. Nothing I could ever do, even when I was trying to push his buttons, because I was kind of confused because he's not acting like everyone else, he's not jealous and he's not controlling, he was so hard to get his blood to boil, for him to get angry, he was so patient and kind with me and he treated me so different than I had ever been treated. And I didn't understand. It took probably like a year and a half into that to recognize that this desire to be with a bad man who somehow is going to treat me right, there's something broken in that. And so it was meeting him and just having a completely different interaction and no matter what I did to try to have it go back to what I knew, he never did. He's treated me like gold. And that was highlighting like holy shit like who have I been dating. What kind of relationships have I been in? What did I do to myself?

This experience of supportive partners, and trying to find their way through to figuring out how to navigate relationships was something Jackie also experienced in her healthy relationship following the abuse she experienced:

Now I've got [current partner]... 14 years later. Never ever has there been a mean... he was abused too and that really made a difference with us. Neither of us wanted the fighting or the yelling or the words. I mean, its 14 years later and we still don't know what we're doing. But it's working. We got nothing. We've never had a blown out fight. It's not that we've never been mad, I just stalk off and go for a walk or lock myself in a room and say don't talk to me. Now, later. We do,

we're human. Of course he does things that tick me off especially after 14 years.

But yeah, no I wouldn't trade him for the world.

Engaging in relationships with supportive partners was a significant source of healing, but these relationships were not the only experience of re-building themselves into healthy beings.

Role of counselling. Counselling also played a major role for the co-researchers in understanding themselves and the world around them. Hannah discussed the experience of her relationship and the aftermath and how counselling helped her to understand the PTSD she experienced as a result of her abuse:

I was just a constant ball of anxiety all the time. It was horrible. It was exhausting. And always being scared of everything. I saw a counsellor at the university, when I was with him and I continued after we broke up but I found that she was more of a band-aid, and she even said that I need deeper trauma therapy where they can see me more than every 6 weeks. So I switched to an agency and saw a guy there and he was really great. I still see him every 2 months, just for a check in.

Hannah's experience of her process included nature in counselling and she found that to be helpful in processing her anxiety. Jessica also discussed the impacts of trauma therapy as part of her healing:

I know there's trauma. My counselor and I have discussed that it's definitely a form of PTSD that I've encountered and the whole healing journey is to be able to not blame myself for this. To not be stuck in it. I really do just replay and replay and feel that I'm I was entirely... responsible for it, that I deserved it. So I get caught in that where I sort of think... oh man. So the healing journey is things that

will help to rewrite those scripts and help me to not get caught in the loop of oh well I just deserve it. I should date men that treat me horribly because I'm fat and I'm un-loveable. I'm deserving of this treatment. So we've done EMDR sessions to try and deal with some of those moments.

It's clear to see that the co-researchers found that nature was not the only aspect of their healing, but that new healthy relationships and counselling; either nature informed or trauma informed, aided in their process of re-building themselves, and re-connecting to the nature experience.

Finally, another small commonality with the co-researchers was their vested interest in the experiences of the other co-researchers. All the individuals involved in this study, finished their interviews by stating they were interested to see how others experience nature in their healing, and whether there would be many similarities. Sometimes individuals can be alone in their processes, and having the understanding and interpretations of others creates a sense of cohesion and belonging for the co-researchers.

Summary

In this chapter, the co-researchers were introduced and demographic information presented. The use of IPA process and a mapping process was used to discover themes, sub-themes and phases. The first phase, *Shut In*, contained the first two themes: *Lost in Myself* and *Any Means to Escape*. This phase provided the emotional context of the co-researchers' experiences. The second phase, *Time for Me*, presented three themes: *Re-Building the Self*, *Life-Long Journey: Healing is Ongoing* and *I Remember When*. This phase focused on the co-researchers' process of healing, and the introduction of nature into the healing journey. The third and final phase: *The Way It's Supposed to Be*, had four

themes: *A Place for Family*, *A Sanctuary*, *All Senses Experience: The Calmness of a Full Experience*, and *Freedom and Openness*. This final phase focused on the experience of nature and ways in which nature contributed to the healing process. These phases and themes were explored and described through the use of many quotes from the co-researchers, in order to present their own narratives to the research. Finally, other findings from the research were discussed that did not necessarily fit the research questions of this study, but were important to note.

In Chapter 5, an extensive discussion and analysis of the themes and phases is presented through the lens of various research in eco-psychology and the earlier presented literature.

Chapter Five – Discussion

Introduction

This study explored the experiences of four women from domestic violence experiences and their integration of nature therapy into their healing journeys. More specifically, it explored the meaning that these individuals found in the use of nature. Chapter Two presented the existing literature of the current conventional options available for domestic violence survivors and the related fields and programs of eco-psychology and wilderness therapy. The following chapter is a summarization and interpretation of the phases and themes discussed in Chapter Four. The limitations of this study are discussed. Finally, implications for the counselling field and counsellors is presented.

Discussion of Themes

Domestic violence against women is a profound issue in our society, and the survivors of abusive relationships typically do not reach out for help (GC, 2009; Russell, 2001). When help is needed in these situations, women find their resources are limited to shelters or appropriate trauma therapy conducted in similar environments to where the abuse occurred (Clevenger, & Roe-Sepowitz, 2009; Edmond, Rubin, & Wambach, 1999; Poole, et al., 2008; Rothbaum, Astin, & Marsteller, 2005). Some work has been done in terms of incorporating more nature into the therapy process through the use of eco-psychology and wilderness therapy programs (e.g. Bettmann, Russell, & Kimber, 2013; Magle-Haberek, et al., 2012; Powch, 1994; Russell, 2001; Russell, & Phillips-Miller, 2002) however there is still a gap in the counselling field of better utilizing nature in the trauma therapy process. This research presented a qualitative phenomenological approach

to understanding the experiences and meanings found by four women who have been in abusive relationships and turned to nature as part of their healing journey.

The four adult women interviewed for this study presented three phases of their journey, with nine themes total. The first phase of the journey: *Shut In*, presented two main themes: *Lost in Myself* and *Any Means to Escape*. This phase of the co-researchers experience presented contextual information and themes of the abusive relationships and their effects of the self-worth and identity of these women.

The second phase: *Time for Me*, held three major themes: *Re-building the Self*, *Life-Long Journey: Healing is Ongoing* and *I Remember When*. This phase of healing included the combination of counselling, new healthy relationships and beginning the participation in nature through the reminders of childhood experiences.

The last phase: *The Way It's Supposed to Be*, contained four main themes: *A Place for Family*, *A Sanctuary*, *All Senses Experience: The Calmness of a Full Experience* and *Freedom and Openness*. At this phase, co-researchers immersed themselves in nature and discussed the various importance and meanings obtained in their nature experiences, both as related to, and not related to their past abusive relationships.

These phases and themes will now be discussed in conjunction with the current theoretical lenses and presented literature review.

Phase One: Shut In

The first phase of this research highlighted the context of the experiences of domestic violence and abuse the four co-researchers faced. Having this context was important for this study as it provided a foundational understanding of the experiences in a domestic violence relationship and the effects such abuse had on the co-researchers

lived experience. Much research has been conducted on the impacts of abuse on the individuals who experience it (Rubin Wainrib, 2006; Ruden, 2011; Levine, 1997; White, 2004) and the first phase of this study continued to highlight the feelings of confinement and lack of freedom that the co-researchers experienced. There were two themes that emerged through this phase. *Lost in Myself* was the first theme, which related to the experiences of loss of identity and self-worth, and the desire to try to fix the relationship. The second theme, *Any Means to Escape*, highlighted the ways in which these individuals attempted to forget or hide from the effects of the abuse, and could begin to see nature as a way out.

Lost in myself. The first theme of this phase, highlighted the feeling of being trapped for these co-researchers. For most of the co-researchers, their self-value and worth was low to begin with, and in being in the abusive relationships, this idea of value and worth was further lost. The beginnings of these relationships started with charming and complimentary partners, and then turned into a constant berating of mental, physical, sexual, financial and/or spiritual abuse. This comes as no surprise, as there has been plenty of research that looks at the effects of abuse and trauma on the mental well-being of individuals. Several studies have discussed the loss of value, worthiness and identity following abuse and trauma (Levine, 1997; Humphreys, & Thiara, 2003; White, 2004; Tzu, 2014).

Furthermore, the sense of loss of who they are, and their freedom through the abuse and trauma was a temporary experience. As the co-researchers began to feel shut off from the world, they lost the essence of who they were. As the healing progressed,

they began to re-build themselves in various ways, they regained a sense of strength and power in their experiences (Levine, 1997).

The first sub theme of this main theme: *I can fix it*, related to the co-researchers experiences of attempting to solve the issues in their relationships or understand why they were in the relationships. For some, this meant an attempt at marriage counselling, for others, trying to change their own behaviours to suit their partner's needs. In whatever ways they attempted to solve the problem, they came to a realization that the abuse occurring and their desire to fix the problem was out of their hands. At times the co-researchers presented a self of self-blame for various specific incidents, which in my hypothesis is related to the low self-confidence and value they already experienced. Self-blame can sometimes be viewed as a means to cope with the abuse experience, which can then lead to feelings of control in the situation (Cascardi, & O'Learly, 1992). If one blames themselves for a particular situation, they can be more in control if a similar situation arises to change their own behavior, which may reduce the abuse they experience.

The second sub theme of the theme: *Who am I?* related to the co-researchers experiences in losing their self-confidence, self-esteem and control of the situation. For some co-researchers, they found themselves losing their own respect for themselves and found difficulty in reaching out for help from others due to embarrassment or shame of their situation. Often in trauma, the survivor will find that the impacts of the trauma are what need healing rather than the immediate abuse itself (Tzu, 2014).

For the co-researchers in this study, the loss of identity, self-respect and worthiness were the very impacts that created a feeling of being shut in, as they continued

to feel confined even months after the relationships ended. Healing the impacts and interpretations of themselves following their abusive relationships, created the most meaning for the co-researchers. For a time during and after their relationships, there was a theme of finding ways to cope with the abuse. This was a means to escape from the impacts the abuse had on their identities.

Any means to escape. Finding ways of coping in domestic violence has been studied, and through various studies, there have been connections between the use of substances to cope, with domestic violence. Poole, Greaves, Jategaonkar, Mccullough, & Chabot, C. (2008) presented their study which found a strong relationship between those using shelters following abusive relationships and high levels of substance use. Two sub-themes related to this theme. The first, *Ways to forget*, related to the negative coping strategies that the co-researchers used to cope with the relationships they were in. Their coping mechanisms included: substance use, unhealthy eating (either over-eating or under-eating), isolation and promiscuity. It's not uncommon for survivors of abuse to experience negative coping habits.

For these co-researchers, they were ways that they could distract themselves from the abuse, and in some ways these strategies fed into their own insecurities and how they were viewed in the relationship. In other research, it is presented that consequences to trauma range significantly, but part of the consequences that may occur are negative coping through substance use, anxiety and depression disorders, PTSD symptoms (Bacchus, Mezey, & Bewley, 2003). These various coping mechanisms that the co-researchers took part in, are a natural process for responding to stress inducing situations (Ruden, 2011).

The second sub theme of *nature as a way out*, related to the introduction of nature. At some points, the co-researchers participated in nature in some way, and often these environments or experiences were not positive. Either by feeling they were forcing themselves to participate in nature, or feeling that others who were in the same. In another study, it was found that women's experiences of nature environments can be effected by their previous experiences in nature, and thus re-traumatize them, or create a negative association to a particular environment or a nature experience in general (Powch, 1994). Some co-researchers could identity when they began their nature participation and the effects of re-building their identities following their abusive relationships.

Phase Two: Time For Me

The second phase of the journey, and the first part of the healing process for the co-researchers began sometimes months or years after the abusive experience. All the co-researchers identified that long after the relationship ended, they still felt shut in or isolated. The negative coping mechanisms were still their way out. One co-researcher did not fit into this mold, and she was of the mindset that nature was always a part of her life, and she continued to include nature, but she began to re-build herself and stop denying who she was. *Time for Me* included several facets; both the actual beginning of nature experiences, but also how they chose to enter nature, what other ways they re-built themselves and the view of healing they had at this time.

Re-building the self. The first theme in this phase consisted of the movement of the co-researchers to re-build their self-worth and identities. This was accomplished through new healthy relationships, counselling and participation in nature. As new

relationships and counselling does not answer this research questions in particular; these particular discussions are focused on in the other findings section. The first aspect of *re-building the self*, related to the importance of identity and this was the space for the co-researchers to reclaim the essence of themselves following their abusive relationships.

This coincides with what literature shows regarding the process of reintegration following abuse. In non-duality, the process of reintegrating trauma relates to the need to work through the impacts of loss of value and worth. These core underlying issues are what the individual needs healing from (Almaas, 1996; Guest, 1995; Nixon, 2013, Tzu, 2014). In EMDR literature, it has been shown that this type of therapy helps to reduce the trauma symptoms individuals may experience (Edmond, et al., 1999). In the literature related to the various approaches and therapies used to help reduce symptoms of trauma and the underlying core issues (loss of worth, identity, self-esteem), many studies identify that it may not be effective for all, or completely healing (Edmond, et al. 1999; Guest, 1995).

The second area of re-building the self, related to what the co-researchers wanted others to know. There was an importance placed on how children, or other family members viewed the co-researchers, and what they learn about self-respect and value through the co-researchers experiences. For the two co-researchers with children, this was especially vital. Their abusive relationships created a feeling that their children would learn that behaving this way towards others is okay, or that they themselves would be a part of an abusive relationship in the future. Re-building themselves and re-writing the underlying core scripts they had about their own value, allowed space for these co-researchers to re-write the scripts for their children and show the children that there is an

importance in identity, and especially for women; it is possible to be independent and have a fulfilling self-value without a partner. Valuing themselves and having self-compassion, allowed the space to validate their own experiences and create an opening to teaching their children the same (Brown, 1999).

Though this particular theme may not be related to the participation and meaning created by nature, it is my opinion that through this initial process of healing, the co-researchers began to re-integrate themselves in their own lives, which then allowed for the understanding of trauma healing to occur, and thus created space for them to begin remembering nature experiences. Remembering nature experiences would then lead to the co-researchers making the choice to reconnect with nature. Beginning the healing of themselves, they learned that healing is an ongoing process and one they will experience throughout their lives.

Life-long journey: Healing is ongoing. The co-researchers of this study identified that healing is a life-long journey: the second theme in this phase. For some co-researchers, the healing from the abuse could come to an end but for most, healing is a continuous path they will always be on. This comes as no surprise, as many professionals in the field of counselling identify that continuous exploring and healing is needed in order to benefit one's well-being. There is always more to learn about yourself and to continue growth and learning, there will be points of healing. It can be viewed as "embracing imperfection" (Tzu, 2014, p.141). It's the idea that no matter how awakened one becomes, there are still going to be issues to work through, and thus the journey continues (Tzu, 2014). This was the experience of the co-researchers, no matter how far they had come in their healing journeys, the path continued towards healing.

Through taking the time for themselves that they needed to begin re-building and healing their trauma experiences from the domestic violence, an opening occurred to remember past experiences with nature.

I remember when. The final theme of this phase was the connection to past experiences in nature. As discussed, sometimes nature experiences can be shaped by the past experiences women had in nature, positively or negatively (Powch, 1994). The co-researchers in this study identified that they remembered *youth experiences* they had, that connected them to the positivity of nature. For some, just remembering was not everything. They also became *nostalgic* for the experiences they once had. At that point, they *made a choice* regarding going back into nature. These three parts of the whole, were considered as the sub-themes for the theme of *I Remember When*.

The first: having youth experiences, all the co-researchers identified a particular youth experience they had in nature, whether with family or on their own. These positive memories, created space for them to re-connect to nature in a positive way (Powch, 1994). These ideas are in line with the literature that discusses that childhood experiences shape the perceptions of nature and increase the likelihood of participating in nature as adults (Chawla, 1998).

Furthermore, the next sub-theme was a sense of nostalgia regarding their childhood experiences. The feelings of loss related to a positive experience, further pushed the co-researchers to wanting to re-experience the positivity. Literature speaks of the deepened connection to nature through meaningful experience in nature in childhood (Chawla, 1998). These meaningful experiences that the co-researchers remembered whether consciously or unconsciously create a space for them to return to nature.

The final sub-theme of this section was making a choice. Due to the remembering of childhood experiences and nostalgia felt, the co-researchers either continued the negative coping they had previously engaged in or made the switch to participate more in nature. Now, this decision was not as simple as perhaps it sounds. I would argue that it was less of a decision-making, and more of a natural pull to nature, following remembering the positive experiences they had in their youth. This idea of pull into nature relates to the bio-philial hypothesis in the literature (Wilson, 1984). Bio-philial is the distinctive love for life and relates to the innate pull humans have towards nature and other living things, that could be a subconscious process, and one that is related to biology (Wilson, 1984). This pull towards nature, allowed the co-researchers to reconnect with nature through different ways. This reconnection held opportunity for the co-researchers to embrace nature and experience what nature had to offer them for their healing.

Phase Three: The Way It's Supposed to Be

The third and final phase of the healing journey for the co-researchers from the domestic violence they experienced, was this point of recognizing nature and the emotions associated as *The Way It's Supposed to Be*. This is not to say that their lives became entangled with only nature experiences, but it is that the nature experiences they had encompassed the many important facets of their new lives. Nature created an open space for them to process, connect and explore their freedom. This idea is cited in literature relating to nature therapy, where it is said that the experience of nature, connects to the mind and body, and relates to psychological and spiritual wellbeing (Lahad as cited in Berger, & McLeod, 2006).

The process of being in nature, allows individuals to connect to their inner selves, and this allows more freedom to explore the underlying core issues of the abuse they experienced. For the co-researchers in this study, their experiences not only allowed them to connect to themselves, but allowed them to connect with others, connect with all their senses and their understanding of the world around them, whether through spirit, science or whatever they chose to believe in. Thus, these experiences created the four themes of the final phase; *A Place for Family, A Sanctuary, All Senses Experience: The Calmness of a Full Experience and Freedom and Openness.*

A place for family. The four co-researchers in this study found that nature provided a place where they could share with their families. Families consisted of parents, children and significant others. There were several various experiences that the co-researchers discussed that gave them meaning in their healing.

The first sub-theme of *bonding and connection*, allowed the co-researchers to have time away from daily lives and stress to be able to connect with their loved ones. They noted that a step away from technology helped to give the space to truly engage with others. Louv (2011) speaks of this idea through the term ‘nature-deficit disorder’ where he identified that the further individuals get from nature and the more involved in technology they are, the connections between them and others lessen, and thus the psychological well-being of the individuals decrease as well. The more time one spends in nature, away from technology, the more connection they experience and more positive mental effects are created (Louv 2011).

Other studies, as discussed earlier, have also shown positive impacts on those who take part in group walks. It showed the increased well-being of individuals who had a

companion to bond with while taking part in nature walks (Marselle, et al, 2014). The experiences of bonding in nature was just one part of the experience of being in nature with others. To have meaning and connection with others, allows individuals to be able to cope more readily with their life situations (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995).

The co-researchers also discussed the *fun times* (second sub-theme) they shared with others in nature, remembering vivid memories from these experiences. Having fun in nature allowed them to let go of the stress of their daily lives. It also removed them from the negative thoughts they experienced and allowed relaxation to occur. Having fun is linked to reduced anxiety and depression and increase in over-all well-being (Zapanta, 2010). I would argue that having fun in nature is a tangent of the bonding and connection the co-researchers felt. To have fun with others, allows us to unwind and create space to connect, which decreases the stress we experience (Zapanta, 2010).

Furthering the experience of nature with others, the co-researchers identified a third sub-theme, in which *passing on of memories* was important. For the two co-researchers with children, they identified memories that they hope their children will carry forward with them, or memories they already look back on. This positive association of nature memories, once again, relates to the idea that significant experiences in life, through nature, can create a positive association for children to reconnect with in adult years (Chawla, 1998).

A sanctuary. The second theme of this phase related to nature being seen as a personal sanctuary to the co-researchers. They began adding nature throughout different areas of their lives and made a connection to being able to process and relax into nature. Research in eco-psychology identifies that the connection between individuals and nature

is required for one's well-being. Davis (1998) notes that there is a deep bond between humans and nature, and if we are able to recognize this bond, there will be psychological benefits in our experiences. Wilber (1995) also has connected the experience of nature with an opportunity for psychological well-being and wholeness. He recognized that to participate in nature wholly, opportunity for psychological transformation and healing was possible (Wilber, 1995). The co-researchers in this study found that their individual participation in nature did contribute to a sense of wholeness, and connection to the self. A sanctuary is a safe place, and as Muir points out, there is an understanding of belonging:

Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life (1909, p. 1).

It was the co-researchers experiences of having a deep connection with nature that allowed them to have the ability to process inner emotions and experience what nature had to offer.

The first sub-theme of their sanctuary experiences was their inclination that nature was a place of *releasing all emotions*. Some co-researchers used nature elements or the openness of nature itself to involve themselves in cathartic release of emotions: a primal therapy (Tzu, 2014). When processing trauma and abuse, we discussed the impacts of the trauma as being the very issues that need to be worked on. This loss of identity is a deep hole left in the being (Almaas, 1996) and the cathartic experiences of the co-researchers was the process of reintegrating that lost part of themselves through yelling into the hills,

throwing sticks or rocks, kicking trees and engaging overall in a process of unleashing the dark emotions that underlie their trauma experiences (Tzu, 2014). It was the re-claiming of their own experiences that the co-researchers identified through their release of emotions. Nature, however, did not only provide them with the space to release emotions, but it also created a space to breathe.

The second sub-theme experiences was *mindfulness* through nature. The co-researchers noted that just being in nature, breathing deeply and paying attention to everything around them, gave them a sense of grounding and peace. At times these slowed down experiences also provided them with a sense of connection to themselves and a way to get away from the negative coping mechanisms they were using previously. Plenty of research has been done looking at the benefits of mindfulness, however, one particular pathway to healing looks at the connection between nature and mindfulness. Shinrin-yoku is a Japanese term for “forest bathing” that was developed in the 1980’s and relates to the effects of breathing in nature. Forest bathing has been shown to significantly reduce stress and a multitude of other health conditions that are caused by stress (Morita, Fukuda, Nagano, Hamajima, Yamamota, et al., 2007). Fredrick Olmsted wrote:

The enjoyment of scenery employs the mind without fatigue and yet exercises it; tranquilises it and yet enlivens it; and thus through the influence of the mind over the body, gives the effect of refreshing rest and reinvigoration to the whole system (Olmsted, 165 as cited in Townsend, & Weerasuriya, 2010, p.85).

The co-researchers found that their mindful experience in nature was a healing one, and at times very restful and invigorating, which is in line with literature on the restorative healing of nature (Kaplan, 1995).

The final sub-theme of the sanctuary experience of the co-researchers was regarding the *give and take of energy* in nature. Their experiences was a direct connection with nature through being able to bring negative energy to nature, and receive the healing energies from nature to restore their energy and emotional well-being. One co-researcher likened the experience to the way trees taken in carbon dioxide and return oxygen into the air. This cleansing of energy, is again related to the restorative healing of nature that has been in literature for many years (Kaplan, 1992; Muir, 1909; Townsend, & Weerasuriya, 2010)

The co-researchers experience of solitude in nature also has some connection to the ‘rites of passage’ activities called ‘solos’ in wilderness therapy programs (Russell, & Phillips-Miller, 2002) where spending time in nature on your own, can create empowerment, and perspective changes.

Shifting to the third theme of the nature experience phase, the co-researchers in the study identified the connection to the senses in their nature experiences.

All senses experience: The calmness of a full experience. Using the senses in nature is related to the mindfulness and meditation practises of various therapy models. The co-researchers in this study found that participating in nature through all the senses, created feelings of grounding, peace, clarity and calmness. Similarly, in forest bathing, it is the intentional practise to slow down the process and connect with nature in all ways and thus open up with all the senses (Amos Clifford, 2013).

All the related sub-themes of this theme: *Touching nature, Smell brings back relaxation, Seeing something more and Hearing everything and nothing*, are all one of the same, as all these various senses brought relaxation and connection to the co-researchers.

These experiences of the co-researchers mirrored Kaplan's (1995) work in restorative practises of nature, where he highlights that attention restoration through nature can occur, as involuntary attention or "fascination" as he terms, in nature through the sights, sounds, smells, etc, can capture human attention without effort, and restore the voluntary attentions (Kaplan, 1995). Even without the concepts of involuntary and voluntary attention, the use of senses has been present in mindfulness practises of Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) for many years so it is no surprise that the co-researchers in this study were able to apply mindfulness practises with their experience of nature.

Mindfulness through the senses is an experience that can be connecting, restoring, resting and fulfilling for many individuals who practise in it (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). These effects of mindfulness are the very effects that the co-researchers in this study found. Really paying attention to themselves and their surroundings created an openness for them to truly appreciate the experience of nature.

Freedom and openness. The final theme of the, *The Way It's Supposed to Be* phase, is the concept of freedom and openness. This theme was the most meaningful aspect of the nature experience in the healing journey for the co-researchers. It comes as no surprise, as we originally began in phase one: *Shut In*; that the freedom and openness the co-researchers experienced in nature was what they were lacking from the beginning of the abuse experience. Nature provided them with a place where they could feel free to express, explore and create. Their experiences of nature as a free and open place coincides with what literature shows. Nature is a place for freedom and openness for many individuals who participate in it (Wilber, 1995; Louv, 2011; Levine, 1994; Johnson, & Fredreick, 2000 as cited in Bond, 2007).

The first sub-theme of the freedom experience of nature was that of *no-judgement*. The co-researchers felt a safety in their experience of nature where nature itself was non-judgemental of whatever process they were going through, as well as the individuals they were with (if with a professional or friend). Their understanding of nature being a witness to whatever experience they have within it, rather than a judgement on their experience, has been noted in research (Berger, & McLeod, 2006) where therapists are the witnesses to whatever process an individual undertakes in nature. Non-judgement also relates to transpersonal and non-dual approaches where the therapist's job in re-integrating the trauma experience is to hold a space for the client with no-judgement and along the client to then themselves let go of their own judgements of the experience (Nixon, 2013; Tzu, 2014). In the co-researchers experience, perhaps nature took the role of the therapist and held a space for them to have no judgement of any experience.

The second sub-theme of freedom and openness was connecting to something *greater than themselves*. Not all the co-researchers identified a spiritual connection to nature, but all co-researchers connected to the idea of nature being something greater than them. It was this connection to mind, body and spirit of the land (Berger, & McLeod, 2006). When Muir (1909) wrote about nature as home, the co-researchers presented this idea, perhaps subconsciously, of how nature provides them with so much, in every facet of their lives that they could not begin to comprehend the vastness of the experience. Copeland, and Copeland, 2005 wrote:

Heading outdoors eventually leads you within. The first people on earth were hikers and campers. So today, when we walk the earth and bed down on it, we're living in the most primitive, elemental way known to our species. We're returning

to a way of life intrinsic to the human experience. We're shedding the burden of millennia of civilization. We're seeking catharsis. We're inviting enlightenment. Being in nature is a connection to yourself, to others and the world around you. The co-researchers exemplified these thoughts through their own lived experiences.

Finally, the third subtheme of freedom was the spiritual connection that two of the co-researchers discussed. Spirituality and nature have gone hand in hand for centuries, beginning with the practises of nature therapy in shamanism (West, 2004). Nature provides an avenue of internal and external processes; where one can connect with their own being on a deeper level; which is known as a transformative power (Wilber, 1995), and where one can connect with others and their surroundings (Berger, 2004).

Through this study and the lived experiences of the four women involved in nature therapy as part of the healing journey, there have been places of overlap between themes. That is to say, there may be repeated thoughts and ideas that connect between themes. The interconnectedness between themes and sub-themes simply show the integration of the nature experience for the co-researchers in this study. Though the experiences of nature varied for the co-researchers, the meaning and connection they received from being in nature, both for the abuse healing and for healing other areas of their life, the commonalities connected to much of the current literature available for nature experiences.

Other findings: Interconnected beings. In reviewing the other findings of this study that did not apply directly to the research questions asked; it became clear that the integrated process of healing was important for the co-researchers. Specifically, during the re-building the self theme of this research, much of what the co-researchers discussed,

showed a connected process of healing where nature played one role within a larger process. The power of new healthy relationships was important for the co-researchers to regain their identities and learn new things about themselves in the world. More importantly, the co-researchers discussed the counselling and trauma therapy they received throughout the healing journey. As previously mentioned literature has showed, many individuals find that more specialized therapy by professionals with particular skills and training in domestic violence and trauma is helpful to their healing (Bacchus, Mezey, & Bewley, 2003; Humphreys, & Thiara, 2003). Perhaps their integrated healing through experiencing counselling as well as nature, played a role in their meaning making in nature; where if they had not attended counselling, they would not have made the same connections in their nature experiences.

Perhaps it is important to keep this in mind moving forward, as it appears the combination of therapy using well studied trauma interventions in conjunction with nature can be more beneficial than any one intervention on its own.

Limitations of Research

There were several limitations of this study related to sample size, geographical location and gender of individuals studied as well as integrated healing processes. Firstly, the sample size and geographical location of study were limited to four co-researchers in a small portion of southern Alberta. This allowed for more in-depth narratives and lived experiences of the individuals, but also created a limitation in a variety of experiences from various ethnicities and cultures. For future opportunities, perhaps more direct recruitment may be necessary in order to accomplish a larger sample size, though at the

same time, having four-co-researchers made for giving more voice to each co-researchers and allowed a beginner researcher the opportunity to explore more freely.

Furthermore, the choice to study the impacts of nature on female individuals with past experience of trauma through domestic violence, was a very narrow sample group. This allowed for specific understanding of a sub-set of a population to express their views and meanings obtained in the use of nature, but also disallowed for the perspectives of other individuals. Other individuals or groups may experience the use of nature in vastly different ways, and thus only a small perspective of nature healing in trauma was obtained.

Though the sample group was limited, the breadth of experiences was not. A lot of rich data was obtained from the four co-researchers, but more narrowed studies on various themes that emerged from this research could prove to be valuable for the counselling field. For example, exploring how the experiences with others in nature benefit the emotional and mental well-being of those healing trauma through nature versus the personal experience of nature on a person's well-being.

This study presented several strengths in presenting the voice and lived experience of a typically marginalized group of people, which provided valuable knowledge into how nature can be used in healing trauma, but it did not come without its limitations.

All of the co-researchers in this study have had counselling at one point or another following the domestic violence in their lives. Having this experience of therapy may have aided in their development of more sophisticated meaning making and understanding of nature in the healing process. Individuals who have not attended

counselling may not have the depth of meaning that the co-researchers in this study experienced.

Implications for Counselling

The rich narratives and lived experiences of the co-researchers have provided valuable knowledge to the counselling field. The themes interpreted from these experiences relate directly to several approaches in counselling, and lead to the understanding that perhaps more holistic approaches in counselling could be beneficial for many individuals.

Firstly, the co-researchers frequently discussed the idea of counselling in nature settings as being beneficial in various ways. Mainly, some of the co-researchers experiences included having the guidance and participation of a counsellor in a nature setting increased their ability to be open regarding the healing they were looking for. Stating that being on a walk with a counselor, or having the release of emotions through the guidance of a trained professional was an experience that provided a lot of freedom for them to explore the issues they face. The idea that counselling could be conducted in nature gave the co-researchers a sense of safety; having the space to explore issues in a non-judgemental, safe place without feeling confined. Having counselling professionals who conduct therapy outside of the walls of conventional office settings, could illicit profound shifts in the client's experiences and processing of trauma. For many reasons, this cannot always be done, and if it can, there are safety concerns at play.

Counselling considerations of having more therapy outdoors does not come without its drawbacks. First of all, looking at the safety of both counselor and client; depending on the location of therapy in nature, would the counselor be able to hold the

space for the client if they are going through an especially difficult time and still feel safe with limited people around? Secondly, how would the client interpret their surroundings? There is the possibility of negative associations made with nature if a person is going through trauma healing and something difficult comes up for them in a particular environment. At that point, that environment now may be coded as a negative place. As well, re-traumatization could occur, depending on how in depth of counselling is happening for the client and the issue the client is working on in general. Sometimes counselling in nature may not be available or safe to do.

Including nature in counselling offices when therapy cannot be done in natural settings, may have benefits to clients. All the co-researchers in this study have included natural elements into their homes and personal spaces in order to increase the feeling of being outdoors. The simple change from silk plants to live plants in counselling offices and having natural elements such as rocks or crystals, can bring clients a step closer to nature. This can be an opening into the experience of trauma healing in nature. Counsellors who can incorporate natural elements into their offices, may find that clients feel more at ease and connected during therapy sessions. Of the same vein, one co-researcher suggested the use of herbs in counselling offices, in order to make natural teas. Using natural herbal teas can help clients feel calmer and grounded when discussing topics that are difficult or unsettling.

Finally, counselors could include more nature based activities for clients to participate in between sessions. Bridging the client to include more nature activity into their lives could include projects like taking a walk through the neighbourhood and noticing the feelings elicited from the various scenes, smells, sounds and feel of nature

elements. Of course, having client's participate in nature outside of counselling may not be for everyone.

The process of healing in nature is an individualized process, which may expand the understanding, clarity or focus a person may have when working on various issues. However, some individuals may not have a draw to go into nature; others may even have a repulsion or fear of nature. Nature may not be suited to individuals who have germ phobias, large animal phobias, or other fears related to the outdoors. Including nature into the field of counselling would need to be done on an individual basis, as seen fit for each client.

It is a belief of mine, through this study and my own experience in nature, that more counsellors in the field could make the shift to incorporate the use of nature elements or nature directly into the counselling sessions. The experience of nature creates a profound connection to self, others and the environment, and this experience can be a gateway to processing trauma and other difficult life phenomenon. The benefits to both clients and counselors outweigh the drawbacks. At times, therapy may seem confined, sheltered and sterile to some individuals and creating spaces that feel more open and inviting through the use of nature elements can shift counselling to be more holistic for more people.

Summary

This study was interested in understanding the experiences of women from domestic violence situations and their use of informal nature therapy in the healing journey. The current literature presented reflected the conventional therapy techniques used with women in the experience of trauma. A differentiation between wilderness

therapy programs and informal nature therapy was presented. The research questions in this study were (a) How do women from domestic violence situations experience nature in the healing journey? And (b) What meanings (if any) do these women experience in nature? A qualitative study was conducted, using an interpretive phenomenological hermeneutic approach. Four adult women with past experience with domestic violence were interviewed. An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis process and mapping was used to find the themes from the transcribed data. Three phases of the journey were found, nine themes and 20 sub-themes were explored, discussed and analysed using the earlier presented literature. Limitations of the study were explored and implications for the counselling field and counselors discussed.

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Appendix A

PARTICIPANT (ADULT) CONSENT FORM

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled How Women from Domestic Violence Situations Experience Informal Nature Therapy as Part of Their Trauma Healing Journey that is being conducted by Daria (Dasha) Reizvikh. Dasha Reizvikh is a Graduate student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge and you may contact her if you have further questions by email or phone; dasha.reizvikh@uleth.ca 403-308-8795.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Counseling Psychology. It is being conducted under the supervision of Drs. Rebecca Hudson Breen and Dr. James Sanders. You may contact my supervisors at (403) 394-3946 (Dr. Rebecca Hudson Breen) or (403) 332-5234 (Dr. James Sanders).

The purpose of this research project is to understand the experience of adult women who have experienced domestic violence and their use of nature as part of their trauma healing journey through lived experience. There is little known about the lived experiences of populations using nature for trauma healing and this research can illuminate ways in which informal nature therapy can be utilized in the counseling process to benefit this population.

The specific research questions guiding the process are: How do women from domestic violence situations experience nature in therapy? And What are the meanings attached (if any) to these experiences?

Research of this type is important because it can provide future treatment opportunities using or incorporating nature for the population of women who have experienced trauma by shaping the way counselling is provided and the way in which clinicians work with this population. As well, there may be added benefits to other women who have experienced domestic violence and/or trauma in creating alternative ways of healing without the use of or in combination with the use of conventional therapeutic interventions.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you may fill the study requirements. The eligibility criteria of the participants (co-researchers) is the following:

- Participants must be 18 years of age or older.
- Participants need to identify their gender as female.
- Participants must have had an experience with a form of domestic violence.
- Participants must be out of the domestic violence relationship for at least a period of 6 months.
- Participants must have seen a professional; therapist, counsellor or psychologist for their experience.

- Participants must have participated in nature activities following the domestic violence experience.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include filling out a demographic information questionnaire and an interview process lasting no more than 2 hours maximum through semi-structured interviewing and informal conversation regarding your lived experience of using informal nature activities in part of a trauma healing journey from a domestic violence situation. The interview process will occur in a location you feel most comfortable and may include the participant's home, a pre-booked room at the University of Lethbridge or an outdoor space. Following interviews, follow up may be needed in order to clarify data or check for accuracy and your permission will be asked prior to completing follow-up phone calls or emails.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including the time and energy required to participate.

There are some potential risks to you by participating in this research and they include psychological and emotional risks. Emotional content of an individual's experience may arise during the semi-structured interview. To prevent or to deal with these risks the following steps will be taken; in the consent process, attention will be paid to the discussion of the individual's experience as possibly triggering some psychological or emotional issues. The researcher, though trained in counselling, will refer to other appropriate counselling services. It is important for the individual to disclose distress during the process as it comes up or following the interview, so the researcher may refer the individual to the appropriate resources.

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include participation in interviews could increase a participants sense of personal strength and overcoming difficult situations. Your contributions to this research will inform counseling practices and treatment for other women in the future.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will be removed and proper measures will be taken to destroy the data; it will not be used in the analysis.

Further contact may be needed to check for accuracy of transcriptions and clarity of information. Participants will be asked if they agree or not agree to a follow up phone call or email following the interview to make sure that you continue to consent to participate in this research.

In terms of protecting your anonymity the interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed. Anonymity is maintained through the use of a pseudonym that the participant may choose. If you choose to participate in snowball sampling, other individuals you recruit to the study may be aware of your participation, however, all content in interviews is kept strictly confidential.

To ensure confidentiality of participants and the confidentiality of the data, the researcher is responsible for the transcription of all interviews. The data will be protected through password locked computer storing to ensure confidentiality. As a graduate student, I will not be the only one viewing the data. Both my thesis supervisor and I will be needing to view the transcriptions.

Data from this research study will be reported in a thesis and may be used in future conference presentation(s) and/or published article(s).

All data will be stored using a digital audio recorder, a USB external storage device and a password locked computer. The files will be stored securely under a code name to ensure no identifying information is stored on the recorder or USB external storage device. All printed data files will be locked in a filing cabinet in the researcher's home office. After a period of five years, all data will be deleted and/or destroyed.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways: Participants are able to request a summary of the study following completion. Other dissemination of results include presenting the completed summary at a thesis defense procedure, possible presentation in conference(s) and through publishing article(s).

In addition to being able to contact the researcher [and, if applicable, the supervisor] at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Chair of the Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee at the University of Lethbridge (403-329-2425).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

<i>Name of Participant</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>
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A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

Appendix B

Advertisement Poster/Flyer

Are you a woman who has participated in nature activities to help in the healing process of trauma?



A researcher is conducting a study at the University of Lethbridge, called: How Women from Domestic Violence Situations Experience Informal Nature Therapy as Part of Their Trauma Healing Journey

I am looking for adult women who have experience with a domestic violence relationship (that they have left minimum of 6 months ago) who have used nature in informal ways to aid in the healing process.

All inquiries will be confidential.

If you are interested in participating or would like more information, please contact:

Dasha Reizvikh

403-308-8795

Dasha.reizvikh@uleth.ca

Appendix C

Screening Questions

Are you over the age of 18?

Would you identify your gender as a female?

Have you experienced a form of domestic violence?

Have you been out of the domestic violence relationship for at least 6 months?

Have you seen a professional; therapist, counsellor, psychologist for your experience?

Have you used nature activities to help in the healing process?

(Must respond with 'yes' to all above questions to be able to participate in the study.)

Appendix D

Demographic Information

Please fill out the questions below. This information will be kept confidential. If you choose not to provide any demographic information, there will be no adverse consequences. This is a voluntary form.

Gender:

- Female
- Male
- Other _____
- Prefer not to say

Ethnicity:

- Hispanic
- Asian
- African-American
- Aboriginal
- Caucasian
- Other _____
- Prefer not to say

Age category:

- 18-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-59
- 60+
- Prefer not to say

Education level:

- Some high school
- High school
- Some College
- College
- Bachelor Degree
- Master Degree
- PhD
- Other _____
- Prefer not to say

Relationship status:

- Single
- In a relationship
- Common-law
- Married
- Divorced
- Separated
- Other _____
- Prefer not to say

Identify as:

- Heterosexual
- Homosexual
- Bisexual
- Other _____
- Prefer not to say

Appendix E

Interview Script

To start the process, can you please tell me about your experiences with domestic violence?

Prompts: Would you be able to speak more about _____?

What meaning did you make of _____?

Could you speak to the emotions you experienced as a result of this?

When I say the word 'trauma', what does that word mean to you?

Prompts: Would you be able to speak more about _____?

What kind of emotions come up thinking about trauma experiences?

I'm interested in people's experiences with nature. Would you be able to speak with me about how you participate in nature?

Prompts: Would you be able to speak more about _____?

What types of activities do you do in nature?

What are some of the emotions you experience when you do _____?

What is your mood like before and after you do these activities?

Anything else you'd like to talk about regarding this?

When I say that nature can be healing, what does that mean to you, if anything?

Prompts: How has nature been healing for you?

What are some of the benefits or consequences of using nature in healing?

Anything else you'd like to talk about regarding this?

Thank you for your participation. Are there any last comments or thoughts you'd like to add?

Thank you again. I will be notifying you by e-mail or phone once transcripts have been written, and analysed in order to complete the member-checking portion of the write-up. Thank you for your time.

Appendix F

Phases, Major Themes and Sub-Themes Table

Phase 1: Shut In	
<i>Themes</i>	<i>Sub-Themes</i>
Lost in Myself	I Can Fix It Who Am I?
Any Means to Escape	Ways to Forget Nature as a Way Out
Phase 2: Time for Me	
Re-building the Self	
Life-Long Journey: Healing is ongoing	
I Remember When	Youth Experiences Nostalgia Making the Choice
Phase 3: The Way It's Supposed to Be	
A Place for Family	Bonding and Connection Fun Times Passing on Memories
A Sanctuary	Releasing All Emotions Mindfulness Give and Take of Energy
All Senses Experience: The Calmness of a Full Experience	Touching Nature Smell Brings Relaxation Seeing Something More Hearing Everything and Nothing
Freedom and Openness	No Judgement Greater Than Self Spiritual Connection

Appendix G

Mapping of Themes and Phases

