A Theoretical and Stakeholder-Informed Assessment Framework for the National Domestic Violence Hotline

Introduction

This brief describes efforts to develop a theoretical framework that explains how the activities of the National Domestic Violence Hotline (The Hotline) can empower and support contactors via phone, text, or chat. The framework is intended to ultimately guide the development of performance measures for The Hotline. These performance measures will assist The Hotline’s efforts of ongoing assessment and evaluation of activities to connect contactors to appropriate services to meet their needs. The brief includes an overview of the project, a description of The Hotline, the rationale for a theoretical framework to guide the development of performance measures, and the specific data collection activities involved in developing the framework. The final section presents the framework and explains its components.

What is the SAF-T project?

The National Domestic Violence Hotline Services Assessment Framework based on Theory (SAF-T) project is a collaborative effort between the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation and the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act (FVPSA) Program within the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) at the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). ACF contracted with Westat and the University of Pittsburgh to conduct this multi-phase project, which aims to develop a theoretical framework and an approach for future evaluation and ongoing performance measurement for the National Domestic Violence Hotline. The purpose of the first phase of the SAF-T project is to build a theoretical framework based on existing behavior change theory to inform the development of performance measures for The Hotline. The purpose of the second phase of the SAF-T project is to improve the performance measures used to assess one or more of The Hotline services.

This brief summarizes efforts from the SAF-T project to develop a theoretical framework. Primary sources of information for developing the framework included:

1. A systematic review of published literature about relationship abuse (including domestic violence and dating violence), safety behavior, and theories of behavior change;

2. Input and data from stakeholders representing a broad range of perspectives focused on the needs of survivors, including interviews with advocates from The Hotline, de-identified chat transcripts from The Hotline, and a concept mapping project; and

3. Input from an expert panel including researchers and practitioners with expertise in relationship abuse, theory, and program evaluation.
What is the National Domestic Violence Hotline?

The Hotline provides 24-hour, national, toll-free, and confidential advocacy services by phone, online chat, and text. Its mission is to, "answer the call to support and shift power back to those affected by relationship abuse." Funded with a $1 million grant appropriated under the Violence Against Women Act of 1994, The Hotline answered its first call on February 21, 1996. Through continued funding from the FVPSA Program, The Hotline offers brief crisis intervention, safety planning, emotional support, resources, and referrals to community programs. It informs and assists adult and youth survivors of relationship abuse, their family and household members, and others affected by violence to build healthy, safe, and supportive communities and families. Through its loveisrespect project, The Hotline provides relevant services to youth and young adults focused on promoting healthy relationships and preventing patterns of abuse.

Why is a theoretical framework needed to describe the work of The Hotline?

A program theory is necessary to explain how and why a program will produce desired outcomes. The Hotline’s mission statement suggests the desired outcomes of The Hotline services are for contactors to feel supported and empowered following an interaction with The Hotline’s advocates. However, no existing theories of behavior change related to hotline use adequately explain how or why The Hotline can expect to achieve these desired outcomes.

Funders increasingly require programs to collect performance data to demonstrate the effectiveness of their services. Demonstrating effectiveness for The Hotline, however, poses a significant challenge. Individuals contact The Hotline with a range of complex needs, requests, and situations that require unique and tailored responses to achieve appropriate outcomes. Comprehensive and relevant measures of performance or outcomes for evaluation must reflect this complexity. The process of developing a theoretical framework specific to The Hotline can clarify how The Hotline’s services can address contactors’ complex needs, requests, and situations to achieve desired outcomes. It can also facilitate further refinement of performance measures and evaluation efforts for The Hotline and other relationship abuse hotlines.

Which theoretical frameworks and associated constructs address relationship abuse and safety behaviors?

As a first step in the process of developing the theoretical framework, the project team conducted a systematic review of literature on relationship abuse, safety behavior, and theory (See Figure 1). The focus on safety behaviors reflects the interest in understanding the state of published literature regarding survivor-centered actions.
The literature review identified 32 articles that applied a theoretical framework to safety behavior among relationship abuse survivors, and those articles addressed 22 theoretical frameworks. The most frequently used theory was the Transtheoretical Model, followed by the Socioecological Model and Investment Model (see Table 1). Other theories included the Theory of Reasoned Action, Psychosocial Readiness Model, and Theory of Planned Behavior. One-quarter of the articles applied more than one theory.

Table 1. Overview of the most frequently used theories in the literature review of articles focused on relationship abuse, safety behavior, and theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME OF THEORY</th>
<th>NUMBER OF ARTICLES USING THEORY</th>
<th>BRIEF DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trantheoretical Model/ Stages of Change</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>This theory states that the behavior change process is conceptualized as five stages of readiness to change behavior and those stages are affected by ten cognitive and behavioral processes of change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioecological Model</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>This theory states that individual behaviors and decisions are influenced by a range of factors with multiple dimensions to include individual characteristics, interpersonal influences, community and organizational factors, and social, political, and cultural contexts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investment Model</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>This theory conceptualizes relationship continuation as predicted by relationship commitment, which is a function of relationship investment, relationship satisfaction, and perceived alternatives.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The theoretical constructs found to support safety behaviors among those affected by relationship abuse were similar across the 32 articles and grouped into three categories: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental factors (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Theoretical constructs that support safety behaviors among those affected by relationship abuse

- **Intrapersonal Factors**
  - Individual characteristics including knowledge, attitudes, perceptions, confidence, and experiences.

- **Interpersonal Factors**
  - Relationship characteristics including interactions with support systems such as family, friends, and healthcare providers.

- **Environmental Factors**
  - Contextual characteristics including availability of resources and structural barriers.

What key elements are necessary for effective brief crisis intervention to empower and support those affected by relationship abuse?

To explore perspectives on key constructs necessary for effective brief crisis intervention to empower and support those affected by relationship abuse, stakeholders participated in a concept mapping activity. Participants represented five different stakeholder groups: (1) The Hotline staff, (2) The Hotline users, (3) Service providers, (4) Policy advocates, and (5) Federal staff. Each participant completed at least one of the four online activities: brainstorming, sorting, rating, and interpretation.

The result of extensive discussions with ACF, the project team, and expert panel members was a refined focus on **empowerment and support** rather than a broader category of “safety behaviors.” This refined focus more accurately reflects the stated mission of The Hotline. Additionally, this focus on support of personally meaningful goals and change agency is consistent with existing scholarship recognizing empowerment as a core construct of most domestic violence programs and the goal of survivor-centered practice.

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In the brainstorming activity, participants added to a pre-populated list of key factors necessary for effective brief crisis intervention. The pre-populated list included findings from the literature review, information collected from interviews with The Hotline’s advocates, and issues identified in a review of selected chat transcripts from The Hotline (See Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** Steps of the concept mapping process to develop a theoretical framework and performance measures

Following the brainstorming activity, participants sorted the final set of factors into meaningful categories and named each category. Next, participants rated each item on its level of importance for empowering and supporting those affected by relationship abuse. During the interpretation session, participants provided feedback and came to a group consensus on names for the final concepts.

Stakeholder participation varied by concept mapping activity: brainstorming (n=48), sorting (n=33), rating (n=32), and interpretation (n=21). Through these concept-mapping activities, stakeholders identified 106 factors necessary for effective brief crisis intervention to empower and support those affected by relationship abuse. Further analyses yielded eight key constructs (Figure 4). For example, (Express) Sensitivity includes 17 factors related to the need for advocates to be sensitive to cultural and language differences.
The Hotline’s advocates, and issues identified in a review of selected chat transcripts from The Hotline. Concept mapping activities combined the results of these activities with stakeholder input. Incorporation of expert panel feedback was the final step in the framework development.

The survivor-centered framework focuses on survivor outcomes of feeling supported and empowered, and key constructs within two components: approach and activities. This framework (Figure 5) is applicable to those affected by relationship abuse who may benefit from brief crisis intervention that The Hotline provides.
This survivor-centered framework prioritizes the needs and wishes of survivors and respects their readiness to make changes. It focuses on tailoring the approach and activities to the unique needs of each individual seeking assistance to achieve the intended outcomes of survivors feeling supported and empowered.

The **Approach component** of the framework includes constructs specific to expressing sensitivity, building trust and rapport, as well as providing validation. This highlights the need for advocates to be sensitive to cultural and language differences. The role of supportive language, empathy, and non-judgmental communication is essential for the development of trust between survivors/contactors and advocates. It also reflects the need for a strength-based approach that validates survivors’ experiences and seeks to engage them in the process.

The **Activities component** includes constructs specific to assessing survivor perspectives and beliefs, assessing situation and needs, developing an action and safety plan, and ultimately, sharing resources. Assessment of what survivors want, their immediate needs and desired outcomes, and their safety is critical. Assessment is necessary to inform next steps and link survivors to relevant local resources to address their needs (e.g., physical, medical, economic, shelter, and legal resources). These activities ideally occur sequentially and result in a survivor-centered response that meets survivors where they are.

As the nested illustration of the framework suggests, survivor-centered is when advocates employ both components (i.e., approach and activities) and the associated constructs. In doing so, survivors are more likely to feel supported and empowered following a brief crisis intervention. While activities can be conducted independent of the approach and result in positive outcomes, when combined with the...
approach components, the effect is likely to be even greater. In other words, the types of services provided during a brief crisis intervention are important, but the manner in which services are delivered also matters. Furthermore, outcomes of a brief crisis intervention may be affected by a broader context, such as cultural and community norms or state-specific policies and laws. Figure 5 displays a shaded background that encompasses the other components of the framework to illustrate the role of context in achieving desired outcomes.

**How can the survivor-centered theoretical framework inform the development of performance measures to assess services that The Hotline provides?**

The theoretical framework presented in Figure 5 identifies key components and constructs necessary for a brief crisis intervention to empower and support those affected by relationship abuse. These will, in turn, be used to develop or identify existing performance measures for ongoing assessment of services that The Hotline provides, and future evaluation efforts.
References


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