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What do men say about their experience of stopping the use of violence towards their partner?

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Abstract

Intimate partner violence (IPV) perpetrated by men is a serious and widespread problem in Aotearoa/New Zealand and worldwide. Various strategies have been developed to address men's use of violence towards their partners. However understanding of the factors and processes that support men desisting from perpetrating IPV is underdeveloped and under researched. The present study breaks from the prevailing quantitative approach focused on recidivism and uses an interpretative phenomenological analysis to understand what helped and hindered men to desist from IPV perpetration, through hearing their experience of this process. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with six previously violent men, with at least 6 months of desistance. Their stories highlighted five superordinate themes involving external factors and internal processing relevant to the desistance process. An event with personal relevance to each man provided the sanction initiating change. For the change process to precede it was important for the men to experience acceptance and support from a significant person, so as to increase their belief in themselves and their sense of agency. Engaging in the desistance process involved gaining awareness of emotions and cognitions, developing the ability to regulate emotions and critically reflecting on beliefs and behaviours to transform these from affirming IPV to affirming safe and respectful behaviours. Progress from resisting the familiarity of perpetrating IPV, to implementing an IPV free identity required proactively engaging in safe and respectful behaviours and considerable time for integration. Desistance needs to be viewed, not as a final destination, but as an ongoing process involving advances and setbacks, with all the men acknowledging they were still in the process of change. Whilst the men who perpetrate IPV need to take responsibility for their actions, the task of eliminating IPV rests with our society as a whole and requires a change in society's attitude from blaming the individual to becoming involved as part of the solution. The implications of these results for individual and social intervention are discussed.

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