Women’s experience of meaningful change following domestic abuse: a longitudinal qualitative study nested in a trial of a specialist psychological advocacy intervention (the PATH trial)

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A pragmatic randomised controlled trial of a psychological intervention delivered to women by Specialist Psychological Advocates (SPAs) in two domestic violence agencies in the UK

Significant and clinically relevant difference between groups at one year for psychological distress (CORE-OM) and depression (PHQ9)
PATH Intervention
[10 sessions]

- Expression of anger and other emotions
- Hand-outs, homework, qu’aires, exercises
- Writing thoughts and feelings in a letter, diary, putting them in a box
- Self-nurture
- Empty chair work, role play
Comparing accounts: 21 intervention & 10 control
12 ‘completer’ & 9 ‘non-completers’

Qualitative study

Up to 3 semi-structured interviews at a safe location

Interpretivist perspective: narrative thematic analysis, grounded in the data

What ‘worked’ or did not ‘work’ in PATH

Women’s accounts of ‘meaningful change’
PATH Intervention

Women’s narratives

Evidence of integration into life at one year

Filled a gap in the availability of psychological – emotional support, highlighted as a significant lack in usual advocacy group.

Importance of delivery by DVA specialist advocates with a specific focus on DVA in tandem with practical support.
Benefits of PATH

**Relationship with SPA**
- Trusted friend but confidential
- Really understood DVA
- Challenging ingrained automatic responses eg: self-blame
- Modelling

**Educational and cognitive**
- Learning about DVA
- PATH techniques and choices

**Emotional**
- First disclosure of current and historic abuse
- Exploring long-repressed emotions
- Intense and emotionally painful but worth it
‘A (advocate) is brilliant, she’s absolutely brilliant, I can talk about I can talk about stuff and it’s okay………………
You feel like you’ve done something wrong, that’s why he hurt me because I did something really bad, so therefore I must be a bad person in some way. The realisation of actually you’re not bad, it wasn’t your fault it happened. It’s like to just come to that point  … we’ve had quite a lot of intense sessions and stuff, um, but to get to that point where you feel good about yourself is just amazing’
More resilient, improved concentration, better sleep

More able to express emotions > suppression, alcohol

Better communication and improved relationships with family

Practising new behaviours eg: not answering texts from perpetrator

Use of handouts, techniques, recommending to others

Increased confidence to go out into the world socially or return to work

More comfortable talking about themselves > prioritising others

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Reasons for stopping PATH

Emotional
• Too overwhelming, feeling too vulnerable
• Too many other issues to cope with
Lack of support between sessions

Psychological
• Desire to move on
• Desire to focus on the future NOT the past

Lack of continuity of SPA
• Maternity leave, sickness, changing jobs
• Moving house, loss of mobile phone
• Poor communication

Education about DVA
Exploring long-repressed emotions
Non-completer (2\textsuperscript{nd} interview)

‘I found it really traumatic, really hard to deal with… I found it very erm, depressing, I didn’t find it uplifting, I found it a real downer… I know that some people really like to dwell and talk about what’s made them sad. I like to talk about it, get it done, shut the envelope, goodbye, post it, gone.’
Mediating Factors for positive adherence and outcomes from PATH

**Situation**
- Exposure to abuse
- Demographic: Age, parenting status

**Psychology**
- Psycho-social ‘readiness’
- Preferred level of engagement

**Service**
- Assessment / Tailoring / optimum no. of sessions
- Continuity of advocate
Ending sessions

‘She said to me, um, we’re going to say goodbye to each other ... think about something that you’d like to bring to me and I’m going to bring something to you... So, um, I brought her, I brought a big bar of chocolate and some Red Bull ... she said to me “Okay” so I said “well, the chocolate is for the feel good and the Red Bull is because you’ve given me back energy, I’ve got myself back”. So for me, that was it, what the sessions gave me ... it was good, I bought her a couple of cans of Red Bull and a big bar of chocolate’
PATH Team (funded by NIHR ‘PROVIDE’ programme grant)

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