

THE RESTORING CAREER OPPORTUNITIES PROGRAM:

A Career Intervention Program for Women Survivors of Domestic Violence

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In the United States, approximately 1.5 million women are physically assaulted and/or raped by an intimate partner every year (National Institute of Justice, 1998). It is estimated that one in four women living in the U.S. will be victims of intimate violence during their lifetimes (Browne & Williams, 1993; Koss, 1990). Domestic violence is defined as "...a pattern of abusive behaviors including a wide range of physical, sexual, and psychological maltreatment used by one person in an intimate relationship against another to gain power unfairly or maintain that person's misuse of power, control, and authority (Walker, 1999, p.23)."

During the past 30 years, researchers from around the world have identified many psychological, sociological, and political conditions associated with intimate partner violence (Ellsberg et al., 1999; McWhirter, 1999), as well as the physical and mental health impact of violence on women and children (Dutton, 1995; Gelles, 1997; Koss, 1990). Although this literature base has grown tremendously, little attention has been given to the long-term impact of domestic violence on women's career development or the role of career counseling and intervention in helping women survive domestic abuse.

Estimates show that 75% of employed battered women are harassed in their work settings by their abusers, and 54% of these women lose their jobs as a result (Crowell & Burgess, 1996). In addition, 40% of battered women reported that domestic abuse caused them to be late for work more than three times a month, 34% reported missing whole days from work, 23% reported difficulties advancing in their careers, and 20% reported difficulties keeping their jobs (Retzlaff,

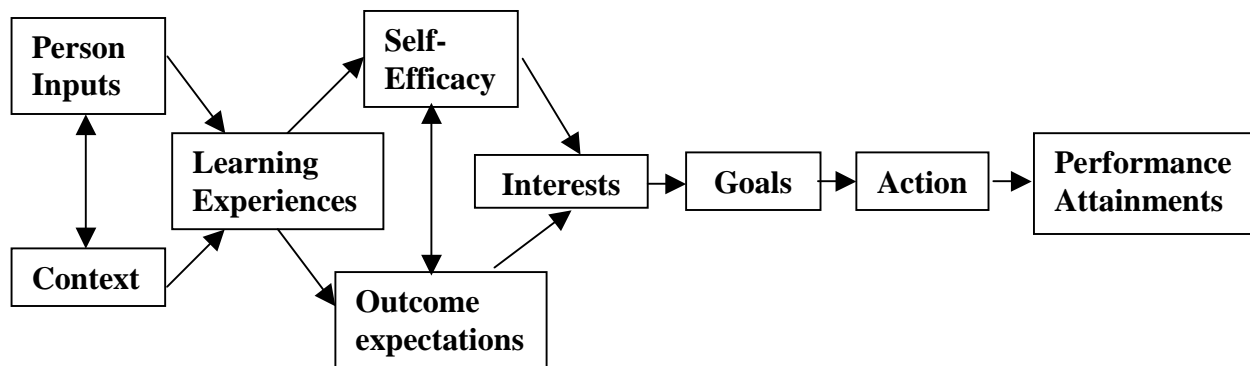
1999). As a result, domestic violence costs U.S. employers approximately \$100 million a year in lost wages, sick leave, absenteeism, and non-productivity (Crowell & Burgess, 1996). The cost to women is especially devastating. Violence research shows that domestic violence has a direct impact in keeping welfare recipients from holding jobs and becoming self-sufficient (American Psychological Association, 2000). Domestic violence deprives women of important career and educational opportunities, and undermines their attempts to attain economic independence (American Psychological Association, 2000; Gragg & McWhirter, in press; Kirkwood, 1993). Battered women's career experiences can no longer be ignored.

THE RESTORING CAREER OPPORTUNITIES PROGRAM

The Restoring Career Opportunities (RCO; Gragg, 2000) program is a career intervention program created specifically for women survivors of domestic violence. The primary goals of this career intervention program are: (1) to facilitate women's identification of career interests, (2) increase awareness, development, and use of career-related skills, (3) increase knowledge of career opportunities, (4) facilitate utilization of community resources, and (5) facilitate identification and planning of future career goals.

The RCO program is a 5-session career intervention program, conducted in a group format, that is based on the tenets of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). SCCT (See Figure 1) highlights the interactive roles of person, environmental, and behavioral variables that contribute to the formation of career and academic interests and the translation of these interests into goals, actions, and attainments. SCCT is a useful framework for examining how women's confidence in their career abilities, formation of career interests, and pursuit of these interests are impacted by living in an abusive context.

Figure 1. Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994)



The RCO program also utilizes all five critical components identified by Brown and Krane (2000) as producing the greatest gains in career outcomes: (1) written exercises, (2) individualized interpretation and feedback, (3) information about work, (4) attention to building support, and (5) exposure to role models (See Table 1 for specific RCO intervention activities). The sixth component of the RCO program is critical consciousness. Latin American scholar Paulo Freire (1970) first defined critical consciousness as the process of “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality (Freire, 1970, p. 19).” For the purposes of the RCO program, critical consciousness was defined as the process by which women become more aware of themselves (identity), others (context), and the relation of self to others (power dynamics), and accordingly, gain greater knowledge and understanding of one’s control and responsibility in her life situations. Consequently, the formation of critical consciousness strengthens an individual’s intention and commitment to change, and increases her active pursuit for liberation.

The addition of critical consciousness involved the inclusion of domestic violence information, analysis of power dynamics, and use of a group facilitation style that promoted community, collaboration, and critical self-reflection (Martin-Baro, 1994). In addition to the

RCO program goals identified above, addition of the critical consciousness component is designed to facilitate women’s awareness and understanding of the effects of domestic violence on their career development and the social context in which they have developed beliefs about themselves and their abilities.

Table 1

CRITICAL INTERVENTION COMPONENTS	RESTORING CAREER OPPORTUNITIES PROGRAM ACTIVITIES
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Written exercises 2. Individualized interpretation & feedback 3. World of work information 4. Attention to building support 5. Modeling 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Oregon Career Information System SKILLS assessment and feedback 2. Journal assignments 3. Self Directed Search 4. Relaxation exercises 5. Oregon Career Information System career exploration 6. Community resource information 7. Informational interviews 8. Exposure to group & community role models 9. Goals worksheets 10. Domestic violence information & power analysis of abuse experiences

TESTING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE RESTORING CAREER OPPORTUNITIES PROGRAM

The RCO program was experimentally evaluated with 66 adult, English-speaking women survivors of domestic violence living in an Oregon community (Gragg & McWhirter, in submission). This study was made possible with the collaborative efforts of the University of Oregon, Oregon Career Information Systems, Lane Community College, and Womenspace, a

domestic violence shelter and advocacy services agency. Each of these agencies provided building space, computer facilities and software programs, daycare, and counseling consultation.

Data from Gragg & McWhirter's (in submission) study shows that the RCO program increases battered women's career self-efficacy, future expectations for career success, critical consciousness of the effects of domestic violence, and identification of specific career barriers and supports. Women who participated in the RCO program also made significant progress toward their career goals. Although the utility and effectiveness of the RCO program needs to be studied further, with different populations of women survivors and in different settings, data collected thus far shows promise of the utility of the RCO program. The RCO program demonstrates how career counseling and intervention may be used to help women survivors attain career satisfaction, economic independence, and ultimately, a life free from abuse.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE RESTORING CAREER OPPORTUNITIES PROGRAM

If you are interested in learning more about the RCO program, how to collaborate with your local community college, domestic violence and other social service agencies, or the results of our study examining the effects of the RCO program, please email Krista M. Gragg, M.S. at kmg@darkwing.uoregon.edu or write to the Restoring Career Opportunities program, c/o Counseling Psychology, 5251 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403-5251. The Restoring Career Opportunities program curriculum manuals and workbooks will soon be available for purchase.

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