

## An Overview of Psychological Well-Being on Women Survivors of Domestic Violence

Elisabet Widyaning Hapsari  
Universitas Katolik Widya Mandala Surabaya  
E-mail: [elisabetwidyaninghapsari@gmail.com](mailto:elisabetwidyaninghapsari@gmail.com)

**Abstract.** Domestic violence (DV) has a negative impact on women, especially older adults who have endured it for the longest periods compared to other age groups. After separation, they need psychological well-being (PWB), which first requires going through a period of Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG). This involves positive coping after trauma, including greater appreciation for life, personal strength, spiritual change, closer relationships, and new possibilities (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2012). Following PTG, these factors are adapted and directed toward good PWB, defined as the ability to accept oneself, maintain positive relationships, live independently, control one's environment, have clear life goals, and strive for growth (Ryff, 1995). This study aims to describe the PWB of women survivors of domestic violence. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with three older adult informants. The findings show that all three informants underwent PTG: they adopted a growth mindset to develop themselves, sought help from others, recognized the importance of social support, deepened spirituality, and strengthened their relationship with God. These aspects contributed to excellent PWB, as all informants were able to accept themselves and forgive the past; maintain positive relationships with family, friends, and children; live autonomously; master their environment; achieve life goals and satisfaction; and strive for betterment for themselves, God, and others. Protective and risk factors also influenced their PWB.

**Keywords:** *Survivors, Psychological Well-Being, Domestic Violence.*

### Introduction

Marriage is a sacred bond between a man and a woman, wherein they make the decision to establish a family and live independently from their parents (Shanahan, 2000). Santoso (2019) also adds that women are categorized as a group vulnerable to violence, particularly domestic violence. Families that have been established are not always harmonious, as cases of domestic violence are often encountered. The Center for Disease Control (in Loue, 2002:14) states that women are nine times more likely to be injured at home compared to on the streets; domestic violence causes more injuries to women than the combined effects of car accidents, robberies, and rape.

Compared to men, women experience domestic violence much more frequently, with men being the primary perpetrators. Komnas Perempuan (2020) mentions that forms

of domestic violence directly reported by women include 425 cases of physical violence, 823 cases of psychological violence, 363 cases of economic violence, and 349 cases of sexual violence. These cases affect women of all ages.

Bernett, Miller-Perrin & Perrin (2010) state that women who have experienced abuse face consequences of fear and helplessness, including: (1) Emotional trauma, such as feelings of frustration and depression; (2) Intellectual impairment, such as reduced problem-solving abilities; and (3) Motivational impairment, such as becoming very passive and experiencing low self-esteem. According to Haj-Yahia (2000), the longer or more frequent wives endure abuse from their husbands, the greater the negative psychological impacts they experience. They are unable to function optimally as individuals and are trapped by an over-focus on their shortcomings. This applies to all adult age groups, from early to late adulthood. Patra, Prakash, Patra & Khanna (2018) note that domestic violence results in severe physical and psychological impacts, preventing victims from living well.

Similarly, Dillon, Hussain, Loxton & Rahman (2013) explain that women who experience domestic violence face physical and psychological symptoms as well as various illnesses, such as depression, PTSD, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, self-harm, insomnia, muscle pain, digestive issues, and diabetes. However, older divorced women who have experienced domestic violence have lower psychological well-being compared to other age groups, as they face poor mental health and chronic diseases (Roberto, McPherson & Brossoie, 2014; Pathak, Dhairyawan & Tariq, 2016).

Even after separation, the negative impacts of violence persist and can seriously affect women for years to come. To prevent these negative effects, women who have experienced domestic violence must develop psychological well-being, allowing them to accept themselves and move forward as better individuals (Maulana & Diningrum, 2015). Before achieving psychological well-being, individuals must first go through a process known as post-traumatic growth.

Post-traumatic growth is a positive change experienced by individuals as a result of enduring deep trauma. It is a consequence of psychological survival efforts, coexisting with residual trauma (Akhtar, 2017). According to Tedeschi & Calhoun (in Akhtar, 2017:30), there are five key aspects of post-traumatic growth: appreciation of life, relating to others, personal strength, new possibilities, and spiritual change. While individuals may

not experience all five aspects, 90% of trauma survivors are likely to experience at least one change among these aspects. Post-traumatic growth itself is achieved through trauma, stress, and coping processes influenced by various internal and external factors (Akhtar, 2017). When individuals face great challenges, it is natural to feel fear that these difficulties will destroy them; however, over time, individuals gradually return to their pre-trauma level of well-being or even reach a more positive state (Akhtar, 2017).

Triplett, Tedeschi, Can, Calhoun & Reeve (2012) suggest that post-traumatic growth has a small or indirect influence on psychological well-being. The process of post-traumatic growth allows individuals to discover new forms of meaning and life purpose, leading to improved psychological well-being. Post-traumatic growth is a precursor to psychological well-being, as it involves a shift in life perception and direction following trauma. This transformation indirectly alters one's perception of life and attitude toward others. Through post-traumatic growth, individuals can achieve psychological well-being, signifying that they have successfully undergone a long process of healing and have become better-functioning and self-actualized individuals.

After experiencing trauma, individuals do not immediately recover, even if they have separated from the source of harm. Divorced women often experience psychological distress, as divorce itself has a direct impact on mental health and psychological well-being (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006:75). Survivors of domestic violence, particularly those in late adulthood, require good psychological well-being, as it enables optimal functioning and the achievement of happiness and success once their needs are met (Desiningrum, 2014). According to Ryff (1989), psychological well-being is also part of positive aging, as individuals continue to grow and adapt. Survivors of domestic violence who decide to divorce take on new statuses and roles, such as being single mothers or widows, and face heavy burdens, including negative stigma from society. Without psychological well-being, survivors struggle to develop themselves, become stagnant, find it hard to accept themselves, and may experience more severe mental health disorders. Their relationships with children and others may deteriorate, they may lose life purpose, and they may fail to accept themselves due to negative views of their past. Older adults, particularly those over 60 years old, are in Erikson's stage of integrity versus despair (Erikson, in Santrock, 2002). If they dwell on negative aspects without accepting the past, they risk falling into regret,

higher levels of depression and loneliness, and significantly reduced life satisfaction. Older adults who feel content with their lives do not regret the past and can function optimally as individuals.

Ryff (1989) stated that psychological well-being is related to resilience and an individual's ability to maintain or achieve well-being when facing difficulties. According to Ryff (1995, in Wells, 2010:102), psychological well-being is a condition where a person is able to accept both their strengths and weaknesses, maintain positive relationships with others, have independence, manage their environment, have clear priorities and goals in life, and continuously grow to develop. Psychological well-being also helps an individual to be aware of: whether they have life goals, understand their abilities, their qualities towards others, and whether they can take control of their lives (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

Ryff & Keyes (1989, in Wells, 2010), stated that there are six aspects of psychological well-being: (1) self-acceptance, which refers to an individual who can accept their strengths, weaknesses, and failures with a positive outlook; (2) positive relationships with others, which refers to an individual who enjoys closeness and intimacy with others and cares for them; (3) autonomy, which refers to the ability to live independently and not according to others' views; (4) environmental mastery, which refers to an individual who can control their surroundings with an open or objective mindset; (5) purpose in life, which refers to an individual who can find meaning in life through their experiences and set clear goals; (6) personal growth, which refers to an individual realizing new potential and talents that can be developed as something new.

### **Method**

This study employed a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach, as the researcher aimed to uncover and explore the psychological well-being of women survivors of domestic violence in depth and detail. The study involved three informants, with the following characteristics: (1) Experienced domestic violence for 3.5 years or more. According to Yaj-Yahia (2000), the longer domestic violence persists, the worse its impact. Campbell & Soeken (1999) found that women who endured violence for 3.5 years experienced greater psychological distress than those who did not. (2) Experienced physical, emotional, or sexual violence. According to Naz & Malik (2018), women who

experience physical and sexual violence report more severe impacts compared to economic and emotional violence. However, Weaver & Resick (2008) found that emotional violence has a direct impact on the development of PTSD compared to physical and sexual violence. Basile, Arias, Desai & Thompson (2004) also found that physical, sexual, and psychological violence results in symptoms of post-traumatic stress. (3) Aged 60 years or older (late adulthood stage). Older adults at this stage experience integrity versus despair (Erikson, in Santrock, 2002). Older widowed women who have been divorced tend to experience loneliness, which becomes a stressor. This is especially true for older adults who lack affection from those around them, are less involved in their environment or social activities, and do not have children living with them (Septaningsih & Na'Imah, 2012).

This study utilized semi-structured interviews, which offer more flexibility than structured interviews while still adhering to a clear interview guideline. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, specifically theory-led thematic analysis (Poerwandari, 2007). Themes were named and categorized based on existing psychological well-being theories.

### **Result**

Survivors of domestic violence were able to overcome the dark times they faced by undergoing post-traumatic growth. The findings indicate that the survivors experienced the following aspects: (1) Greater appreciation for life. The informants viewed life more positively and felt relief over time as they experienced God's goodness. (2) Closer relationships. The three informants became more open to others, including friends, family, and spiritual leaders. They accepted social support that helped them resolve various problems. (3) Spiritual change. The three informants grew closer to God after separating from their former husbands and involved God in their daily lives, resulting in positive impacts on their well-being.

### **Discussion**

Goodkind, Bybee, & Sullivan (2003) state that during the post-traumatic growth period, survivors who courageously seek social support, share their problems, and receive encouragement from family and friends—such as financial assistance, help with childcare, or housing—can achieve high or good psychological well-being. When individuals face

significant difficulties and dare to confront their fears, over time, they gradually return to their previous level of psychological well-being, or even reach a more positive state (Akhtar, 2017). According to Wijaya, Widyorini, Primasturi, & Dominguez (2021), resilience and post-traumatic growth can specifically predict the level of psychological well-being, with post-traumatic growth itself serving as a mediator. High psychological well-being is achieved when individuals can overcome negative thoughts and express gratitude for life, a process obtained through post-traumatic growth (Park, Chmielewski, & Blank, 2010).

Triplett, Tedeschi, Can, Calhoun, & Reeve (2012) argue that post-traumatic growth has an indirect influence on psychological well-being. The process of post-traumatic growth allows individuals to discover new forms of meaning and purpose in life, leading to better psychological well-being. Post-traumatic growth is thus a precursor to psychological well-being, as it involves shifts in life perceptions and attitudes toward others after trauma.

With good psychological well-being, older survivors of domestic violence can avoid falling into despair, which would lead to persistent regret, higher levels of depression and loneliness, and drastically reduced life satisfaction (Erikson, in Santrock, 2002). This would also protect them from mental health issues, relationship deterioration, dissatisfaction with life, and self-rejection due to negative views of their past. Awareness of the importance of psychological well-being helps individuals identify and develop what feels lost into something more optimal (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

The three informants in this study were aware that as they aged, they needed to become better individuals, especially after deepening their relationship with God. This awareness was particularly evident in informants M and T. The four positive coping mechanisms they employed during post-traumatic growth continued to be practiced after their legal or marital separation from their abusive husbands (Bryngeirsdottir & Halldorsdottir, 2022). These coping mechanisms significantly contributed to their good psychological well-being.

According to Ryff & Keyes (1989, in Wells, 2010), psychological well-being consists of six aspects: self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. All six aspects were present

in the three informants, though in varying forms: (1) Self-acceptance. All three informants forgave their abusive ex-husbands, accepted themselves fully, and let go of their past by praying to God. Crapolicchio, Vezzali, & Regalia (2020) state that self-acceptance is one step toward forgiveness, helping victims of domestic violence minimize self-criticism, accept themselves and their past, and develop beyond their trauma. (2) Positive relationships with others. The informants shared their experiences with others who had similar problems, built positive relationships with others, maintained good relations with their children and others, and openly accepted social support. Umberson, Crosnoe, & Reczek (2010) state that social relationships promote healthy behavior and have lifelong positive effects, reducing psychological disturbances and enhancing psychological well-being (Uchino, in Umberson et al., 2010). (3) Autonomy. The informants showed autonomy by standing firm in their decisions even before marriage, such as working to support their children without financial assistance from their ex-husbands. They maintained confidence despite no longer being married and responded positively to negative attitudes from others. They also made independent decisions without being swayed by others' negative comments. This aligns with Ahinkorah, Ciskcon, & Seidu (2018), who argue that women who empower themselves and achieve higher education tend to reject patriarchal cultural norms and fight for their rights. (4) Environmental mastery. The informants demonstrated their ability to adapt and seize opportunities, with two of them continuing to work despite being widowed. They balanced their daily activities with their physical capabilities, accepted their physical limitations, and found ways to overcome obstacles. This is consistent with White (2018), who notes that self-confidence influences problem-solving strategies and resilience, allowing individuals to handle challenges in their environment effectively. (5) Purpose in life. All the informants expressed satisfaction with their lives, feeling secure and peaceful, and sought nothing more than health and well-being. They achieved this through prayer and faith in God. Choirina, Ayriza, & Wibowo (2021) suggest that religious faith helps individuals find life's meaning and satisfaction, fulfilling basic human needs for happiness. (6) Personal growth. The informants demonstrated personal growth by striving to become better individuals for themselves and others. They pursued self-improvement by living a religious life and listening to advice from others following their painful experiences. This aligns with D'Amore, Martin, Wood, & Brooks (2018), who

highlight that abuse survivors often rediscover themselves and heal through coping and reflection, enabling them to achieve stability and reflect on past experiences (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2001).

There are also factors that influence the aspects of psychological well-being of the informants, namely: protective factors and risk factors. For protective factors, they consist of personality development over time, marital status, attitudes of others, socio-economic status, social relationships, social support, and lastly, religiosity. Personality development over time is reflected in the three informants becoming better individuals, experiencing personality changes, finding goodness in life, knowing how to overcome obstacles, and experiencing a decline in physical strength. According to Ryff (in Wells, 2010), an individual's perception of themselves changes over time, from early adulthood, midlife, to later stages, depending on how they evaluate or describe their experiences, both past and future. All these perceptions are crucial in realizing the importance of psychological well-being.

Marital status: The three informants felt more prosperous, happy, and at peace after no longer being married, as there was no longer any hurt. This affects their self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, and life goals. Esciba-Aguir & Tenias-Burillo (in Wells, 2010) stated that good relationships with a partner can improve psychological well-being and lead to better mental health, and vice versa—where the informants' psychological well-being was low before, but after separating and no longer being in a toxic relationship or experiencing abuse, their psychological well-being improved. Clarke-Stewart & Brentano (2006) stated that there are positive effects after divorce, such as becoming a more independent individual and experiencing increased self-esteem and confidence. In line with Amato (2000), after women divorce, their career opportunities, social life, and happiness increase.

There are also attitudes from others that influence how others view women who have recently divorced or are widowed. The three informants are women who play the roles of mother, wife, and daughter, which influences their decisions to separate or maintain their marriage and to work to meet the needs of their children. According to Ryff (in Wells, 2010), gender differences influence psychological well-being, especially in older individuals, as women experience significant rejection of their ambitions over time. As



women age, they also have a higher risk of illness or widowhood. Women also carry high responsibilities for the family, doing housework and caring for children. Women become both mothers and workers, which can affect their health and well-being. As women age, their roles also increase, and studies show that being a woman and working more than 30 hours managing household chores has a negative effect on psychological well-being.

There is also socio-economic status, which affects all aspects. Two informants in this study are still working and happy with their jobs, while one informant has been unemployed due to physical conditions and receives financial assistance from family. According to Ryff (in Wells, 2010), socio-economic status is related to several aspects of psychological well-being, such as self-acceptance, personal growth, and even purpose in life. According to Kaplan, Shema & Leite (in Wells, 2010), when the economy is relatively stable, psychological well-being increases and is associated with higher purpose in life, self-acceptance, personal growth, and environmental mastery.

Social relationships: The three informants still maintain good relationships with those around them, which influences all aspects. According to Ryff (in Wells, 2010), positive social relationships lead to specific psychological functioning, making individuals feel satisfied and have a positive mood. Litwin (in Wells, 2010) stated that the environment and social support are very important for the elderly, as the presence of family and friends supporting the elderly can improve their well-being. Another important factor is the elderly's satisfaction with the people around them, as family becomes a protective factor for their health (Krause, in Wells, 2010). This is consistent with the research by Montez & Umberson (2010), which stated that social relationships affect health, such as mental health, physical health, healthy behaviors, and risk of death. Emotional and financial support can boost immunity, metabolism, and health, as well as reduce the risk of unhealthy behaviors and prevent illness. The three informants received help from those around them, such as neighbors, siblings, friends, and family, which allowed them to have good psychological well-being.

Social support: The three informants receive emotional and material support from many people, helping them stay happy, bounce back, and approach everything positively. This is in line with the research by Machisa, Christofides & Jewkes (2018) titled "Social support factors associated with psychological resilience among women survivors of

intimate partner violence in Gauteng, South Africa," which stated that women who have experienced domestic violence and receive social support have higher resilience, where women who can establish relationships and seek sources of support have a positive effect on their mental health.

Social support itself comes from the social relationships established by the informants with those around them. According to Amati, Meggiolaro, Rivellini & Zaccarin (2018), social relationships are the best source for individuals to gain many benefits, such as receiving advice on problems, spending time talking together, economic assistance, and this can lead someone to achieve higher well-being than before. Without good social relationships, individuals have less chance of receiving social support. Consistent with this research, the three informants have good social relationships with friends, family, and others, which allows them to receive social support and thus have good psychological well-being.

Religiosity: The three informants have strong beliefs, rely on and trust in God, so they are always grateful and involve God in their daily lives. Religiosity affects all aspects of psychological well-being. According to Frazier, Mintz & Mobley (in Wells, 2010), belief in religion affects all aspects of psychological well-being. This is consistent with the research by Fitriani (2016), which stated that various religious values followed by an individual appear in their daily behavior, boosting self-confidence, providing a foundation for the meaning of life, giving someone direction in life, giving them identity, and making events meaningful.

There are also risk factors, such as physical decline, where the three informants no longer have as much strength as before, so they must adjust their physical condition to their activities. This is supported by Ryff (in Wells, 2010), who stated that physical decline affects a person's level of well-being.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the three informants experienced or demonstrated the six aspects of psychological well-being, namely Self-acceptance. They forgave their ex-husbands who committed violence, accepted themselves fully, and let go of the past. This was achieved through prayer to God. Positive relationships with others. They shared their experiences

with others who faced similar problems, built positive relationships, maintained good relations with children and others, and openly accepted social support. Autonomy. They showed independence by making firm decisions, such as working to support their children despite a lack of financial support from their ex-husbands. They maintained confidence, disregarded negative remarks from others, and continued to act positively toward those who responded negatively to them. Environmental mastery. They demonstrated adaptability, balancing daily activities with their physical capabilities, not overexerting themselves, and finding solutions to challenges they faced. Purpose in life. They expressed satisfaction with life, feeling secure and at peace, and sought nothing more than health and well-being. Personal growth. They strove to become better individuals for themselves and others, fostering self-improvement through religious practices and learning from past experiences.

These six aspects are manifested differently in each informant. With good psychological well-being, survivors of domestic violence are better equipped to face daily life positively.

### **Suggestions**

Support from family and friends can help survivors of domestic violence maintain their psychological well-being. Families or friends can also invite survivors to engage in activities together to help them remain healthy, retain their independence, and enhance their psychological well-being.

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