THINGS TO THINK ABOUT
AS WE DEVELOP PATIENCE AND EMPATHY

Change often happens slowly, and it may take individuals several tries before they succeed in leaving an abusive partner or achieving sustained recovery from substance dependence (IDHS, 2000) should either, or both, be their choice. People with psychiatric illnesses, physical or developmental disabilities or extenuating circumstances such as poverty or homelessness may need longer to achieve goals.

Cindy Obtinario, Chemical Dependency/Domestic Violence Specialist and Women’s Advocate at New Beginnings in Seattle, WA, observes:

“Each woman has her own process, and the more issues she has, the longer it takes. If you have chemical dependency, mental health issues, intergenerational trauma, or child sexual abuse – the more issues you come to the table with, the more complex healing will be. And we are a society of quick fixes. We get a headache, we take a pill and it’s supposed to be gone. Hurry up. Instant, instant, instant” (Obtinario, 2010).

If we find ourselves getting impatient with a survivor’s progress, it may help to consider the ways this person’s life is different from ours. What seems easy or obvious to us may not be easy or obvious to someone coping with multiple issues at once. A survivor of multi-abuse trauma may face barriers that we don’t even think about. For example:

- She may have no car, no money, or no phone.
- She may not know about available resources.
- She may be unable to read. Many people who are illiterate feel shame and won’t admit this. But inability to read or write would make it hard or impossible to do some assignments or fill out forms.
- A mental health issue such as depression, or a developmental issue such as autism or fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, may make it hard to stay focused, or accomplish even simple tasks – especially if a person has not received appropriate services or has stopped taking medication because it costs too much.
- Medications may have unpleasant side effects, and don’t always work right away, which can be discouraging.
- Because the social services system is so fragmented in many communities, bureaucratic paperwork, policies and procedures can be confusing to the point of mind-boggling, and extremely frustrating.
We may sometimes need to expand our idea of what advocacy means when serving someone who is overwhelmed by multiple issues. Cindy Obtinario (2010) shares:

“Keeping in mind the empowerment philosophy advocates in the domestic violence field share – we believe each woman solves her own problems in her own way and time – I also believe it is important for us to remember there are people who may need a bit more. Sometimes, when one has chemical dependency or mental health issues or complex PTSD, and we use a model requiring self-advocacy, a survivor experiencing multiple barriers might at that moment say, ‘Just forget it. Never mind. This is too difficult.’

“I think we need to be aware that the more barriers a woman has, the more support and advocacy we might need to provide. Not doing it for her, but with her by saying things like, ‘It looks like you’re having a hard time with this right now. Come on into my office, and we can make these phone calls together.’ With advocacy presented this way, she can dial the numbers with me sitting here, knowing she has somebody who cares. She has the comfort of knowing she has someone there who supports her through her process.”

References
