

## ACE-DV Webinar Tip Sheet #4

# Not One Path: Relationships with Those Who Cause Harm

This tip sheet offers key points and takeaways from the webinar, [Not One Path: Speaking to Our Relationships with Those Who Abuse](#), hosted by the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence (January 2019). This webinar featured the voices and experiences of Adult Children Exposed to Domestic Violence (ACE-DV) Leadership Forum members David Adams, Lenny Hayes, Ericka Kimball, and Shenna Morris.

## Humanizing those who cause harm

- Those who cause harm are multidimensional individuals with complex relationships
- The monster narrative is harmful for survivors, children, and those who cause harm alike
- Labeling people “abuser” or “criminal” is especially problematic for communities of color with a history of criminalization
- Those who cause harm are not all the same – they are whole and unique people

*“It’s not just this one way. It’s not always bad. There are complexities in the ways this plays out in our families.” – Ericka*

*“Continuing the monster narrative doesn’t serve justice or peace to anyone, and I really try to be mindful as a woman of color not to contribute to a narrative that may further dehumanize people in my community.” – Shenna*

Shenna emphasized how humanizing those who abuse has been really important to her own healing and growth. She noted its importance in *“how I support other survivors in my work, and essentially overall how I care for and contribute to the culture of the movement.”*

Ericka described her confusion as a child, and also as an adult doing this work, saying, *“It was hard for me to reconcile that I love my father even though he does bad things. And when people label him as just bad, it’s hard for me to explain how I still love him, and I’m still attached to him, and can see some of the good of him. It’s like a discounting of our relationship. ”*

Lenny noted that when we dehumanize people, we prevent them from healing, saying, *“We have to invite individuals to the table when they are ready to heal.”*

## Speaking to fears of becoming like the person who caused harm to your family

- Internalizing the idea that you are “part monster” has real and lifelong consequences
- It’s important to monitor oneself, knowing that abuse is learned behavior
- Emphasize that change is possible

Lenny shared that there have been times they’ve recognized abusive tendencies in themselves, noting that it requires a constant awareness and monitoring of how you’re feeling –



both checking in with yourself and with others. Ericka similarly shared, “In my family it was repeatedly said that I’m just like my dad. If I’m angry, I’m just like my dad in ways that I handle my anger. It’s a constant process for me to understand that anger is an okay emotion that doesn’t equal abuse, while also being aware that sometimes our response in anger can be abusive.”

## Speaking to personal accountability and forgiveness

- Accountability and forgiveness are separate but intertwined concepts
- Forgiveness is a deeply personal and individual choice
- Our personal journeys are connected to those of our siblings
- Accountability looks different across cultures
- It’s important to draw boundaries with those who have caused you harm or remain unhealthy
- Examine your own thoughts and feelings related to forgiveness

*“I do a certain amount of criticism of a lot of people in the system... I always point out that these are well-meaning people with well-meaning intentions, but their words and actions did devastating things to the people they are trying to help.” - James*

When David looks at his siblings, he sees examples of both forgiveness and unforgiveness. He noted that their relationships with their father, and the ways in which they each engage in those relationships, has an impact on each of them.

Ericka asserted that she doesn’t rely on her father’s repentance or accountability for her to forgive the situation and not carry it, saying, “I haven’t forgiven my father, but I’ve come to this place where I don’t need to have it make sense to me to rationalize that I have a relationship with him, he’s never going to be accountable for his behaviors, I’m never going to condone them, and we can figure out what this messiness looks like.”

Lenny has learned to maintain their health by separating from those who have caused them harm, saying, “I still love my mother even though she was one of my main perpetrators... She gave me life, but she taught me bad things.”

Shenna notes how for her, forgiveness is always evolving. Her father suffers from mental illness, which has further complicated the ideas of forgiveness and accountability. There were times when community accountability was enough, and other times where criminal justice was needed.

## Navigating and speaking truth to ongoing family dynamics

- Separation does not necessarily mean the violence stops
- Those in contact are still strategizing safety or managing abusive behaviors
- Survivor guilt is common, especially in cases where siblings are at different places when it comes to acceptance, coping, and/or healing
- It’s common for families to slip into familiar survival roles when triggered by stress
- While sharing our stories, we may still be actively engaged in strategizing for our own well-being and the safety of our victim parent, as well as navigating sibling dynamics

*“The reality is that you may very well be always navigating safety throughout your lifespan.” – Shenna*

*“When you are in a place of healing and you’re around other individuals who are toxic and unhealthy, you become a threat to them, and they will often lash out even more at you... I always keep in mind what an Elder told me one time: ‘The Creator puts those people in front of you to remind you not to be that way.’” – Lenny*



David reflected on the unfairness he feels around the fact that his father is alive while his mother is not, offering that he might be closer to his siblings if this wasn't the case. He also shared the guilt he feels because his healing journey is further along, and he feels powerless to help them.

Ericka noted that even if there isn't active perpetration, the family can still struggle with PTSD and other symptoms that come from that experience. Stressful situations can trigger families into revisiting/reverting to familiar roles that they may have had while actively surviving abuse.

## Embracing dual identities: survivor and advocate

- The impact of our advocacy lens on our relationships with those who abuse
- Our paths as advocates may be separate and distinct from the paths of our siblings
- There is additional pressure on advocates to know how to do it (recover/heal/thrive) the “right way”
- Survivors of color may take an additional risk in coming forward with their story, as some may perceive it as a betrayal to family or community

*“I feel so confident in my [movement work], but not so confident in how I deal with my family.” - David*

Ericka and David both intentionally keep their advocacy/movement work separate from their family. For Shenna, only her mother's side is aware of her work, and in that space she finds herself utilizing her advocacy knowledge to deepen their understanding and analysis of domestic violence. She shared, “One of the fortunate things for me is that I haven't been shunned or disowned by my family. But when I think about how that can very much be at play in the African American community, I recognize what a challenge that can be for other child survivors who want to share their story.” Similarly, Lenny shared that in Native community they are taught for many reasons to keep silent about many issues that impact their community, like violence.

## Healing and self-care

- Creating boundaries with family members is critical to our own well-being
- Practice self-awareness
- Be permissive with yourself around reclaiming your childhood through play and playfulness

David noted the importance of setting limits/boundaries around our relationships with those who abuse – identifying both what you can and can't do or be in relationship with them. Sheena is also very intentional about how she remains in contact, being careful to engage in ways that do not cause her further harm. And Ericka tries to be really aware of the drivers behind her behavior – asking herself what boundaries she's setting and why.

Lenny said that when the little boy within comes out to play, it's okay! After being told not to act that way for so long, Lenny permits it as a helpful strategy for self-care.

Access the full recording and related materials from this webinar at [VAWnet.org](http://VAWnet.org).

More information about the ACE-DV project can be found at [nrcdv.org](http://nrcdv.org).

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