

**VICTIMS' EXPERIENCES CONCERNING THE ACTIONS OF  
THE AUTHORITIES AND THE COPING SKILLS USED FOR  
SURVIVING PARTNER STALKING**

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PURONVARSI, NELLI & RUOTANEN, VIIVI: Vainon uhrien kokemukset viranomaisten toiminnasta sekä käytetyt coping-keinot parisuhdevainosta selviytymisessä

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Tutkimuksemme on osa suomalaista VARJO-hanketta, jonka tarkoitus on kehittää palveluita eron jälkeisen vainon uhrien tueksi sekä ehkäisevään työhön ja kuntoutukseen liittyviä työmuotoja. Tutkimuksemme aineisto koostui naispuolisten vainon uhrien internetpohjaisen vertaisryhmän aikana käydyistä keskusteluista, joita tarkastelimme sisällönanalyysin avulla. Tutkimuksemme tarkoitus oli lisätä tietoisuutta vainon uhrien kokemuksista liittyen viranomaisten toimintaan ja tutkintaprosessiin sekä selviytymiskeinoista, jotka he kokivat hyödyllisiksi yrittäessään selviytyä eron jälkeisestä vainosta.

Löysimme neljä pääluokkaa kuvaamaan uhrien kokemuksia viranomaistoiminnasta ja tutkintaprosessista. Nämä luokat olivat ongelmat vainon kohtaamisessa, tyytymättömyys tutkintaprosessiin, luottamus viranomaisiin ja odotukset viranomaisten toiminnasta. Vaikka uhreilla oli myös positiivisia kohtaamisia viranomaisten kanssa, nousivat negatiiviset kokemukset aineistosta esiin selkeämmin.

Löysimme neljä pääluokkaa myös uhrien käyttämistä selviytymiskeinoista. Nämä luokat olivat sisäinen työskentely, ulkoinen tuki, turvallisuustoimenpiteet ja orientoituminen tulevaisuuteen. Vainon uhrien oma aktiivinen rooli selviytymisessä korostui, mutta myös ulkopuolelta saatava tuki koettiin erityisen tärkeäksi.

Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että viranomaisilla on yhä moninaisia vaikeuksia vainon kohtaamisessa. Tulevaisuudessa viranomaisille, etenkin poliiseille ja oikeusviranomaisille sekä lastensuojelun työntekijöille, on tarjottava kattavampaa koulutusta vainoon liittyen, jotta he kykenevät kohtaamaan vainotilanteita paremmin. Tämä tutkimus osoittaa lisäksi vainon uhrien käyttävän monenlaisia selviytymiskeinoja yrittäessään selviytyä vainokokemuksistaan ja rakentaa hyvinvointiaan uudelleen traumaattisten kokemusten jälkeen. Nämä tulokset tarjoavat arvokasta tietoa vainon uhrien selviytymisprosessista, ja niiden avulla vainon uhreille tarjottavaa tukea voidaan paremmin suunnata vastaamaan heidän tarpeitaan.

Avainsanat: vaino, parisuhdevaino, eron jälkeinen vainoaminen, parisuhdeväkivalta, selviytymiskeinot, viranomaiset, vertaistuki

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PURONVARSI, NELLI & RUOTANEN, VIIVI: Victims' experiences concerning the actions of the authorities and the coping skills used when surviving partner stalking

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Our study is a part of the Finnish VARJO-project, which aims to develop services to support the victims of post-separation stalking and methods for preventive work and rehabilitation. The data of our study consists of conversations from an internet-based peer support group for female victims of stalking. We used content analysis as our research method. The aim of our study was to increase knowledge about the experiences of victims of stalking concerning the actions of the authorities and the investigation process as well as the coping skills they considered as useful when trying to survive from partner stalking.

We found four main categories to describe the victims' experiences concerning the actions of the authorities and the investigation process. These categories were problems in dealing with stalking, dissatisfaction with the investigation process, trust in the authorities and expectations regarding the actions of the authorities. Even though the victims had also experienced positive meetings with the authorities, the negative experiences stood out more clearly from the data.

We also found four main categories to describe the coping skills that the victims had used. These categories were inner processing, external support, security measures and orientation for the future. The active role of the victims of stalking was emphasized in their coping, but the victims also felt that the external support was particularly important for their survival.

The results of this research indicate that the authorities still have diverse problems when dealing with stalking. In the future, there should be offered more comprehensive education about stalking for the authorities, especially for the police, representatives of the justice system and the child protection personnel in order for them to be able to deal with stalking more effectively. This study also indicates that the victims of stalking use many kinds of coping mechanisms when trying to survive from their stalking experiences and when reconstructing their well-being after the traumatic experiences. These results provide valuable information about the coping processes of the stalking victims, so that the support offered for them can be better directed to correspond to their needs.

Key words: stalking, partner stalking, post-separation stalking, intimate partner violence, coping skills, authorities, peer support

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Stalking

There are many ways to define stalking, and stalking behavior is seen differently in different countries (Sheridan, Blaauw & Davies, 2003). Commonly stalking refers to an intentional behavior that causes fear and sense of threat to the victim (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2014). It is repetitive, long-lasting and unwanted action toward a specific person, who is usually familiar with the stalker (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2014; Sheridan, Blaauw & Davies, 2003; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Stalking is often combined with physical and domestic violence (Melon, 2000), but usually stalkers use insidious ways to cause threat for the victim that may appear even as a normal and quite harmless behavior (Sheridan, Blaauw & Davies, 2003). It is not unusual that victim's family and friends become involved in the stalking (Logan & Walker, 2009).

Stalking has raised interest since the year 1990, when the first legal definition of stalking as a crime was proposed in California (Sheridan et al., 2003; Zona, Palarea & Lane, 1998). In Finland stalking was criminalized only recently, in 2014. The legal definition of stalking in Finland is as follows: "A person who repeatedly threatens, observes, contacts or in another comparable manner unjustifiably stalks another so that this is conducive towards instilling fear or anxiety in the person being stalked, shall, unless an equally or a more severe penalty is provided elsewhere in law for the act, be sentenced for stalking to a fine or to imprisonment for at most two years" (L 13.12.2013/879). Despite of the legislation, indicating stalking in front of the law has proved to be very challenging (Lynch & Logan, 2015).

Women are significantly more likely than men to be stalked, and most stalkers in turn tend to be men (Sheridan, et al., 2003). Many stalkers appear to suffer from mental disorders and express antisocial behavior, and these traits together with substance abuse are regarded resulting in more severe stalking behavior (Mullen, Pathé, Purcell & Stuart, 1999; Norris, Huss & Palarea, 2011). It seems that at greatest risk for becoming stalked are people that are

somehow vulnerable, people in occupations of helping others and well-known people in especially visible jobs, for example in the areas of politics and media (Pathé, Mullen & Purcell, 2001; Sheridan et al., 2003). Victims who work report that they have experienced more suspect and they are also stalked much longer than victims who do not work, probably because workplaces give stalkers an easy opportunity to pursue their victims (Nicastro, Cousins & Spitzberg, 2000).

A notable fact is that stalking does not consist of just a single act – it is rather a combination of many unpleasant incidents, which have lasted a long time and have a significant influence on the victim's future (Häkkinen, 2008; Sheridan et al., 2003). According to Spitzberg and Cupach (2007), the average duration of one stalking case is about 22 months or close two years. It has been showed that legal punishments as an attempt to end stalking are somewhat ineffective (Brewster, 2001) and stalkers are likely to commit their crimes again after their arrest (Rosenfield, 2003), so putting an end to stalking can be very challenging.

There are different forms of stalking: it can include direct contact with the victim, surveillance tactics, invasion strategies, harassment and threats (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Stalkers can also end up using quite imaginative tactics, for example spying their victim via computer (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Stalking is often manifested as invisible and hard for other people to recognize (Nikupeteri, 2016). It might appear as behavior that third parties may not even consider as harmful but which is still extremely unpleasant for the victims, for example the stalker walking past their house (Sheridan et al., 2003) or calling them repeatedly (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). A remarkable point concerning stalking is that the stalker can cause feelings of fear and insecurity for the victim even without being physically in touch with her (Nikupeteri, 2016).

Häkkinen, Hagelstam and Santtila (2003) have found three different stalking styles: expressive/violence, instrumental/pursuit and instrumental/manipulation theme. In the expressive/violence theme, the stalking behavior often stems from anger over being rejected by the victim. The motive for stalking can also be instrumental: the stalker might try to hold on to the relationship by force. The stalker's actions include violent acts, thefts and blackmailing. The instrumental/pursuit theme consists of such acts as following the victim, sending unwanted messages and gifts and violating the victim's privacy. The stalker's motivation usually seems to be instrumental but he may also achieve emotional relief by his

stalking behavior. In the instrumental/manipulation style, stalking is instrumental and sometimes only a way to try to achieve other kinds of criminal results. It includes manipulation, threats and sometimes even attempted homicide. This theme is hypothesized to be related especially to family relationships.

Stalking can include behavior that severely threatens the life of the victim (Sheridan et al., 2003) – one dangerous part of stalking is the physical violence (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004). Studies have shown a connection between the threats of the stalker and the actual use of physical violence (Björklund, 2010; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). There is also a significant correlation between the stalker's violence history and violent stalking behavior committed against the victim (Palarea, Zona, Lane & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1999). Stalking can even be seen as a risk for committing femicide (McFarlane, Campbell, Wilt, Sachs & Ulrich, 1999). A risk to this kind of extreme evilness should be first evaluated when trying to recognize the stalking (Nikupeteri, 2016).

Because stalking clearly differs from other crimes, it also has a different impact on victims than crimes which are violent but only happen once (Sheridan & Davies, 2001). The harm caused for the victim is, for example, less concrete and less measurable than the harm caused by other crimes (Logan & Walker, 2010). Cupach and Spitzberg (2004) have introduced three kinds of effects stalking has on its victim. First-order effects mean the harms stalking causes to the person who is the direct target of stalking while second-order effects include the impacts that stalking has on victim's relationships with other people. Third-order effects are the harms that stalking causes to the third parties in the stalking process. Stalking can annoy family and friends of the victim and rise concern about their own safety so that they decide to withdraw from the whole situation (Logan & Walker, 2009).

Victims of stalking have reported that the most common symptom resulting from being stalked is feeling threatened (Nicastro, Cousins & Spitzberg, 2000). Living in long-lasting fear, losing control of one's own life and missing the predictability of future severely harm the victim (Hall, 1998; Logan & Walker, 2009). The consequences of stalking reflect widely into psychological, behavioral, social and physical well-being of the victims (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004; Sheridan, et al., 2003; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Many of the victims experience severe distress and confusion (Logan & Walker, 2010; Pathé, Mullen & Purcell, 2001). Furthermore, feelings of powerlessness, withdrawal, fear and self-blame are common

in the process and many victims have symptoms of anxiety (Pathé, Mullen & Purcell, 2001; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). In many cases the stalking experience leads to post-traumatic disorder (Pathé, Mullen & Purcell, 2001).

## **1.2. Partner stalking**

The common misbelief is that a stalker usually is a total stranger, who for some reasons becomes obsessed with the victim (Hall, 1998). Research, however, suggests that in most stalking cases, the stalker and the victim know each other in some way (Sheridan et al., 2003). It is typical that they are for example co-workers or neighbours (Zona, Palarea & Lane, 1998), but in most cases the victim becomes stalked by her previous intimate partner (Melton, 2000; Sheridan et al., 2003; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). According to Tjaden and Thoennes (2000), victims of stalking are also more likely to view their experiences as stalking when the stalker is someone close to them.

Many times, partner stalking begins when the relationship ends: a feeling of losing control and being rejected can lead to anger and terrorism against the ex-partner (Nicastro, Cousins & Spitzberg, 2000). Thus, the reason for partner stalking usually seems to be the incapability to accept the end of the relationship (Hall, 1998). Acts of stalking and violence are also more likely to happen if the stalker has expressed control behavior already during the relationship (Ornstein & Rickne, 2013). Partner stalking is clearly different from other forms of stalking; it is partner violence where relationship history and intimate knowledge about the victim gives stalker a head start and possibility to use diverse strategies to harm the victim (Logan & Walker, 2010; Logan & Walker, 2009).

Victims of partner stalking often report experiencing strange incidents, which can be hard for other people to believe – for example ex-partners breaking into their house and moving things from one room to another just for their own pleasure of causing fear for the victim (Hall, 1998). Intimate partner stalkers are more likely to threaten their victims and to carry these threats out (Logan & Walker, 2009). They behave in more treacherous ways and seem to use more dangerous behavior than other stalkers: using more physical approaches when trying to contact their victims and generally committing more violence against them (Palarea ym.,



1999; Sheridan & Davies, 2001). They are also more likely to threaten and harm third parties (Sheridan & Davies, 2001). With or without violence, stalking should be recognized as a form of violent behavior (Nikupeteri, 2016).

The stalking behavior often includes attempts to complicate the victim's position as a responsible mother (Nikupeteri, 2016). After a break-up, stalking usually happens through the stalker's meetings with the children, by underrating and damaging the relationship between the mother and her children. Stalking causes harm for the children also if they end up witnessing the stalking behavior that their father directs towards their mother (Nikupeteri, 2015). Children can also sense the fear, concerns and sense of insecurity of their mother. The mother's and the children's need of help in stalking are significantly interrelated (Nikupeteri, 2016). Mothers typically worry about their children's well-being in the stalking process and they can also feel guilty about not being able to protect their children from the stalker (Nikupeteri, 2015).

### **1.3. Actions of the authorities**

Nikupeteri (2016) refers to a concept named stalking-knowledge (*vainotieto*) which means knowledge associated with recognizing and intervening in stalking and the know-how of professionals who meet with the victims. It is affected by different kind of conscious and unconscious perceptions, values and policies formed by our culture and which direct professionals' ways of evaluating the stalking. To make the stalking visible, professionals need to be detached from these cultural norms and beliefs and notice the hidden aspects of the phenomenon. It is crucial to understand the different dimensions of stalking-knowledge that include for example analyzing the nature of the stalking, making the victim's judicial position better, evaluating the contradictory power relations and recognizing the risks linked with the stalking.

It is important that different authorities understand the arenas of co-operation as well as the roles and responsibilities of each other. Multi-professional interference can be seen as a condition when there is a social problem and crime concerning many parties whose well-being is at risk (Nikupeteri, 2016). The police are in a significant role in protecting and supporting the victims of stalking (Geistman, 2009; Lynch & Logan, 2015) and charging the

stalkers (Lynch & Logan, 2015). The job of prosecutors in stalking is to evaluate and decide about a possible crime, and they have an essential role in deciding whether to prosecute based on the preliminary investigation material (Kinnunen, 2016; Nikupeteri, 2016).

Child-protection personnel, for their part, are responsible for evaluating family situations from the children's perspective, and they make decisions based on the knowledge about possible violence and stalking in the situation (Kinnunen, 2016; Nikupeteri, 2016). This way the child protection services is in an important position to negotiate, for example, about the custody, visiting rights and alimony concerning the child after a break-up. What makes it all challenging for professionals is that they often have disintegrated and twisted information about the situation based on different accounts of the parties, and the police, for example, often have very limited resources to investigate the incidents (Nikupeteri, 2016).

Several studies indicate that the authorities fail to understand the nature of stalking and the harmful consequences it causes for the victims (Brewster, 2001; Logan & Walker, 2010; Melton, 2000) – especially the justice system and the police do not seem to take it seriously (Brewster, 2001; Melton, 2000; Nikupeteri, 2016). Furthermore, the authorities often lack the information of the victims' real experiences and the crucial need for safety planning in the beginning of the process (Logan & Walker, 2010). The actions and behavior of the victim can also have an impact on the stalker and the nature of stalking, which can lead other people to blame the victim for provoking the stalker (Ewan, Pathe & Ogloff, 2011). These reasons may lead to the situation where victims fail to have the required support and protection from the police (Geistman, 2009).

Victims often have low expectations towards police before getting help and feelings of frustration after contacting them (Brewster, 2001). The police is seen as ignorant and victims feel they receive contradictory advices from the authorities. Victims see that especially advice given by the police punish the victims from the situation and offend their rights; in many cases police, for example, have recommended victims to move somewhere else to solve the stalking problem. Victims of stalking are one of the most unjust groups of crimes (Spence-Diehl, 2003). Even when some victims have expressed being satisfied with the justice system, the same number of victims still mention them lacking helpfulness (Baum, Catalano, Rand & Rose, 2009) and sympathy (Brewster, 1999).

How stalking is recognized and responded by the police, may originate from the general attitudes in the community like underestimating, justifying and normalizing stalking (McKeon, McEwan & Luebbers, 2015). Men are generally seen more likely to excuse and blame victims for the stalking (Lambert, Smith, Geistman, Cluse-Tolar & Jiang, 2013; McKeon et al., 2015) which is remarkable because majority of the police officers tend to be men (Geistman, 2009). It is not unusual that the police do not want to get involved in the stalking and even if they do, their means can turn out to be ineffective (Baum et al., 2009). Victim service representatives are seen more sensitive to notice the severity of the stalking than the police (Logan & Walker, 2010).

The prevalent law towards stalking has not been defined for long and there are multiple differences between countries in what they regard as stalking (Melton, 2000). It has been experienced that the definition of stalking has many problematic aspects, which complicates the work of the police (Lynch & Logan, 2015). One severe and widely noticed problem concerning stalking is the lack of the necessary proofs to indicate it. That causes the authorities feelings of uncertainty whether their doubts are right or wrong, which raises their threshold to take action in the situation (Ellonen, 2010). Informing victims to document the stalking behavior from the very beginning is vitally important when charging and arresting the stalkers (Logan & Walker, 2010; Lynch & Logan, 2015). The responsibility of gathering the proofs cannot, however, be entirely left for the victims themselves – the situation requires also multi-professional intervention (Nikupeteri, 2016).

It has emerged that the amount of previous charges prosecuted by one officer affects how dangerously stalking is seen: officers, who had charged stalking before, are more likely to charge stalkers, whereas the other officers saw the situation less crucial (Lynch & Logan, 2015). The research literature often views stalking as a simpler phenomenon than it really is and forgets the diverse aspects of it (Logan & Walker, 2009). This in turn might prevent the authorities from seeing stalking as a pattern of behavior, not just as a single act. The need for specific education to recognize stalking and find a way to put an end to it is highly emphasized (Lynch & Logan, 2015; McKeon et al., 2015).

Some key notifications about stalking have been presented in a special report of stalking law, which was carried out during the years of 2012-2014 (National Stalking Advocacy Service, 2015). One of them is that stalking is not convicted and punished properly – sentences are

light, if the stalkers are convicted at all. There is also a serious demand for treatments and programs for stalkers and suggestion to keep a register to track and regulate sustained stalkers. Above all, the need for the uniform guidelines concerning stalking is widely recognized. When concerning the victims' standpoint, essential for them would be to become genuinely encountered and have their external and internal safety secured (Nikupeteri, 2016). Recognizing the victims' need for help demands understanding the stalking as a violent behavior and realizing that the traditional protections for typical violence occasions are no longer sufficient.

When comparing the victims of stalking to the victims of domestic violence without stalking, the last-mentioned group seems to have more positive experiences about how prosecutors respond to the situation (Department of Justice, 2016; Finn, 2004). Satisfaction with the outcome still varies within this group of victims also – some are very content with the results while others are not (Finn, 2004). They meet the same kind of lack of sympathetic treatment and understanding as the victims of stalking (Department of Justice, 2016). Furthermore, there appears inadequacy in how the police pays attention to the victims' safety and the appeared harassment. Continuity when dealing with the changing authorities and gaining regular updates in the process are also something to be improved.

#### **1.4. Coping skills**

Coping can simply be defined as a continuous process, which includes cognitive and behavioral efforts to get through psychological stress caused by external and/or internal factors (Lazarus, 1993). Lazarus (1966) has presented three processes appearing in a stressful situation: primary appraisal, secondary appraisal and coping. Primary appraisal means the process where the individual notices a threat, secondary appraisal is about considering a suitable response to the threat in question, and coping means putting the response into practice.

Efforts to manage with the stressful situation can be separated into two different coping strategies: problem-focused coping aims at doing something to change the causes of stress, and the meaning of emotion-focused coping is to change one's emotional reaction to the

stressful situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1980). Many times, both of these coping strategies appear in the situation, but the problem-focused coping, however, is perceived to rule when the person believes that something constructive can be done in the situation, whereas the emotion-focused coping seems to dominate when the person thinks that the stressful situation must be accepted the way it is.

Although there has been some research about how individuals cope with stalking, literature about the topic is still lacking (Amar & Alexy, 2010). Most studies seem to concentrate on victims' use of coping skills during the acute stalking (Amar & Alexy, 2010; Brewster, 2001; Dutton & Winstead, 2011), but not much exactly on what kind of strategies victims use when trying to recover from the past stalking or how they start to build their lives again after the traumatic experience.

Cupach and Spitzberg (2004) have presented five categories of coping skills used by victims suffering from stalking: moving against, moving with, moving inward, moving away and moving outward. Moving against means victim's efforts trying to harm the stalker for example putting him at risk of imprisonment whereas moving with -tactic includes efforts to interact with the stalker either in a constructive or negative way. Moving inward means focusing on one's own efficacy in the situation - one can for example start exercising or meditating, but problematically many times this strategy leads to self-destructive behavior, for example abusing alcohol or taking drugs.

Moving away was the largest category of coping responses in the study and it means efforts to avoid the stalker and escape from him for example by withdrawing from social interaction or changing one's address. According to Cupach and Spitzberg (2004) this is most likely seen to be productive way to cope with stalking, like also moving outward, which is a strategy of seeking support and help from other people. Dutton and Winstead (2011) have found similar categories about coping responses of stalked people. Moving inward was the only strategy not found in their study.

The study of Nicastro et al. (2000) showed a small correlation between stalker's used pursuit tactics and victim's defensive avoidance coping responses – it was, however, unclear whether the increases in stalking produced more victim coping responses or whether the victim coping responses somehow caused more stalking. The victims' coping strategies were not

consistently related to their symptoms which can mean that the coping strategies used are likely to be ineffective or they appear too late in the stalking process.

Restraining orders are one way for trying to put an end to stalking but they have some disadvantages (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004). They give stalker a feeling that his actions have an impact on the victim and offer him a possibility to be in the company of the victim at least one more time, in the court. These can motivate the stalker instead of discouraging him and some stalkers continue their stalking even after restraining order comes into effect (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004; Logan & Walker, 2010). Some victims also fear that the restraining order might lead the stalker become even more violent (Spence-Diehl, 2003). However, in many cases restraining order can also be a functional way to protect the victim and intervene in stalking (Häkkinen et al., 2003).

Probably because the stalker and the victim usually know each other personally, victims try to handle the stalking by themselves and act nicely towards the stalker (Brewster, 2001; Dutton & Winstead, 2011). Only after some unsuccessful attempts to survive on their own, most victims end up seeking help from the police (Brewster, 2001). Hanging up and blocking calls seem to be quite commonly used strategies to cope with the stalking (Brewster, 2001; Nicastro, Cousins & Spitzberg, 2000). Other typical ways to cope with the stalker are for example changing one's phone number and moving to another place (Brewster, 2001). Therefore, attempts to ignore or avoid the stalker seem to be typical behavioral coping actions in a stalking (Björklund, 2010). Victims also tend to use common defense mechanisms, such as ignoring and minimizing the problem or distancing oneself from the situation, which can actually cause more psychological problems for them (Amar & Alexy, 2010).

Intensive interventions and securing victims' safety are important in order to prevent long-lasting disorders and help victims to recover from the stalking experience (Mullen et al., 2009; Pathé et al., 2001) Understanding the nature of stalking and its effects, helping victims to find hope and building a confidential dyadic relationship are the key elements in confronting the victim (Pathé et al., 2001). It is necessary to offer victims knowledge about typical symptoms after stalking and make them see that they are not responsible for the situation (Pathé et al., 2001).

Medical and cognitive-behavioral therapy have found to be useful when treating victims of stalking (Mullen et al., 2009). Relaxation and breathing techniques can have an impact in reducing anxiety symptoms and improving victims' functioning, and many people also benefit from starting to exercise after the traumatic experience (Pathé et al., 2001; Spence-Diehl, 2003). Therapeutic support groups in turn provide victims a chance to share their hard experiences and reduce their sense of isolation and loneliness (Pathé et al. 2001).

The significance of peer support in stressful situations has been recognized in some earlier studies (Fox, 2011; Griffiths, Reynolds & Vassallo, 2015). In Griffiths et al. (2015) study, the public appreciated the possibility to participate in a peer support group where they had the chance to discuss about their mental health concerns with other people. Most participants reported peer support having several advantages: the shared understanding was in a key position to reduce their sense of isolation and to increase their sense of belonging. Many participants felt safe to share their experiences to others. Some participants indicated that they felt sorry, sad or worried about others when reading about their problems, but the majority of participants still claimed benefiting from the different forms of received peer support: kindness, caring, comfort, warmth, understanding, encouragement, self-esteem support and friendship. Searching for informal social support seems to be typical when becoming a victim of intimate partner violence (Cameron, 2011), but for the best of our knowledge, there are no studies about peer support groups organized for victims of stalking.

Because violence often is a part of stalking, we searched how victims of domestic violence have coped with their situation. It turned out that the most efficient coping skills of the abused are safety planning, problem-solving strategies, religious strategies, focusing on self-care, emotional expression and social support (Rizo, 2013). Least helpful strategies used are related to self-criticism, suicidal thoughts, minimization, substance use and strategies that give only temporary relief. Good and active coping skills are more likely to be used when victims have social resources and support from the institutional facets, while avoidant-based strategies are more likely to be used when victims are suffering from increased violence and trauma-related guilt or when they lack social support.

One crucial issue in coping is seeking help from formal facets, which is affected by several things. Victims of violence are more likely to pursue formal support if their children's well-being is at risk (Meyer, 2010), if their abusive partner has received help earlier so they

already have experience of getting help and when victims have lately gone through life threatening incidents (Logan & Walker, 2004). The coping skills that are used are essential because they affect victims' mental health significantly (Rizo, 2013). Emotion-focused avoidant strategies usually lead to bad outcomes like anxiety, depression and low self-esteem while problem-focused active strategies bring forth better mental health outcomes if the victim is getting the support needed in the situation (Rizo, 2013; Taft, Resic, Panuzio, Vogt & Mechanic, 2007).

### **1.5. Aim of the study and research questions**

The purpose of our study was to increase knowledge concerning victims of partner stalking, especially about their constructive coping skills and experiences of received help so that the authorities could be better educated to help them to survive from stalking process in the future. We concentrated on victims' statements about how they evaluated the actions of the authorities and the investigation process during the stalking process and what kind of strategies they used in building their lives and well-being again after the stalking experience. Our research questions were

- 1) How do victims of partner stalking experience the actions of the authorities and the investigation process?
- 2) What kind of coping skills do victims of partner stalking use to survive the stalking experience?



## **2. METHODS**

### **2.1. Research project**

This study is a part of the Finnish VARJO-project, which was carried out during 2012-2016. The project aims at strengthening the safety of the families suffering from violent post-separation partner stalking, improving the precautionary work and creating possibilities for supporting victims' functioning by offering peer support and helping victims to recover from the stalking experience. One important goal is also to create methods for completing public utilities, offering knowledge and participating in planning services for families suffering from partner stalking. The target group of the project includes the direct victims of stalking, family members (for example children) and stalkers. The development project was implemented in co-operation with VIOLA – a women's association for breaking free from violence and the women's shelter in Oulu.

### **2.2. Data**

Our study concentrates on an internet-based conversation material of female victims experiencing partner stalking. The VARJO-project and Women's Line together implemented this national support group for women experiencing partner stalking after their relationship had ended. The participants had the chance to discuss together about their experiences during five weeks, from October to November in 2015 via internet. It was the first organized support group on internet for stalked women in Finland. The participants were chosen in the order they signed up for the group. Before the support group begun its action, the women were asked questions about their background, for example about their stalking experiences and motivation to participate in the group.

The group and the conversations were actively guided by two employees of Women's Line, who were called attendants. One of them was a psychologist and the other one a social psychologist. Their purpose was to welcome all participants in the group and make sure that the conversation proceeded. They supported the participants in their hard life situations and

made sure all behaved in a respectful manner toward each other. They also created rules for the group and gave instructions for network safety.

14 women signed up for the group, but four of them never signed in the actual conversation area. One of the ten people who signed in the conversation area and participated in the conversation did not want to participate in the study. Furthermore, the attendants were not able to ask one participant if she wanted to be a part of the study, so all the comments of these two participants had been deleted from our data before we started to examine it. Our study concentrated on the remaining eight people who did participate in the conversations. Six of them did participate in the conversations actively by sharing their own experiences and commenting others' but two of them took part in the conversations only with one short comment. Therefore, our study had eight participants but the data consisted mostly of the experiences of six people.

Safety of the group was a special question and it had to be considered when marketing the group, choosing and instructing the participants and when carrying out the group. The group was not marketed in public – only via professionals of different organizations like Women's Line, women's shelter groups and multi-professional working groups like MARAK-groups. Signing up for the group happened via victim's personal health care professional or contacting one of the group's attendants. This kind of procedure was done to retain the feeling of safety for the victims and keep the stalkers unaware of the group. Approved participants got a new e-mail-address, username and password in a safe-guaranteed letter. Participants chose a nickname that they used when attending the group.

During the five-week support group, it was possible to write in the conversation area 24 hours a day. The internet forum consisted of different areas that were formed by the attendants or the participants themselves. Everyone had an opportunity to create new conversation areas about topics that they thought as important and after a new conversation area had been created, everyone could add their comments there. The meaning of the areas was to clarify the conversation and separate different themes from each other. In the end, attendants and participants together had created 11 conversation areas that were named after the following headlines:

1. Information and participation instructions for the participants of the network group
2. Rules of the network support group
3. Network safety in the peer group
4. This is what I want to share about myself
5. My experiences of the violence and stalking
6. Judicial processes (restraining order, custody etc.)
7. Safety tips
8. Mental abuse, its consequences and the process of becoming whole
9. Trauma caused by stalking and the received help to it
10. What do you take to yourself from this group? What do you want to say?
11. Give us a feedback of the experiences of the group, we need it!

The attendants began most of the conversations, which tells about their active role in the group. Despite this, the participants awakened discussion about many important things by themselves also and created conversation areas about judicial processes and trauma caused by stalking and the help received to it (areas 6 and 9). Most of the discussion occurred in the area of stalking experiences and safety tips (areas 5 and 7), but even though each conversation area had its own theme, participants discussed also other things than just the specific topic of the area. We focused only on participants' comments in the conversation and did not include the comments of the two attendants into our analysis, because they were not victims of stalking but only leading the conversation.

The first three areas (1-3) were about attendants giving participants instructions, rules and tips for safety in the group but none of the participants took part in them, which is why we left them out of our analysis. Feedback forms (11) were also left out from the analysis because they did not rouse common conversation and had only four answers. That left us with seven proper conversation areas (4-10) that we included into our analysis because their themes created actual discussion among participants. The original internet conversation material was 120 pages long altogether, and with above-mentioned principles, we included 112 of them into our analysis.

Stalking experiences were diversified concerning, for example, digital stalking and using contact with kids and judicial processes as a tool of stalking. Women had experienced stalking already during the relationship and especially after the break-up. Even though the

most experiences presented in this study are about post-separation stalking, we will use the term partner stalking, because in many cases the stalking had begun already during the relationship. Many of the participants of this study had experienced both mental and physical violence. Some of the victims were further in their recovery process than others and thereby were able to give tips and support to other participants, but there was no one for whom stalking would totally be in the past.

### **2.3. Analysis**

Because we wanted to examine the material without any pre-assumptions and ready-made research questions, we chose qualitative content analysis as our research method. It aims to systematically describe the meaning of the material which is done by classifying parts of the text into fewer categories (Schreier, 2012; Weber, 1990). It is a useful method to choose especially when the data is wide and needs to be interpreted (Schreier, 2012). It does not matter how the data has been collected, and it can consist of texts, symbolic matter, images or sounds (Krippendorf, 2013; Schreier, 2012). Concentrating on specific, selected aspects of the data is what separates content analysis from many other qualitative methods; irrelevant data concerning the research questions is left out from the analysis (Schreier, 2012).

Searching meanings from the data occurs by reading the text and following where it leads or beginning to examine data with ready-made research questions (Krippendorf, 2013). The coding frame is the main point of the whole method – a way of structuring the material and leading the categorization process (Schreier, 2012). It includes all the meanings found in the text relevant to the research questions (Schreier, 2012). Categorization process starts purely from the matter (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Krippendorf, 2013), and with the coding frame the data is reduced to main categories and subcategories (Schreier, 2012). Categories of the classification develop and change during the process when new discoveries are being made by researcher's inductive reasoning (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2016). There is not just one correct way to build the categories and that is the reason why creative working of each researcher among the categories is being emphasized (Krippendorf, 2013).

First, we began to read the whole material and pick up some central themes. Two interesting phenomena gained many comments from the participants and were mentioned several times regardless of the prevalent theme of the conversation: actions of the authorities and women's coping skills used for surviving stalking. Because these two themes obviously were important for the victims, we decided to start investigating them more and shaped our research questions:

- 1) How do victims of partner stalking experience the actions of the authorities and the investigation process?
- 2) What kind of coping skills do victims of partner stalking use to survive the stalking experience?

We read the material again, searching and pointing out victims' comments about the actions of the authorities. At the same time, we formed rudimentary categories of their experiences. In the third time we read the material, we searched for women's comments about their coping skills and formed some categories from them. After that, we continued reading the material repeatedly, as long as we came across with new relevant information that could be put into new categories. In the process, we realized there were some overlaps in the categories. Therefore, we had to unite some of them for creating a bigger picture.

After having a several number of different categories in the beginning, we ended up with four main categories for both of our research questions involving all the data we discovered in the process. When the categories were ready, we gave them their final names. All the classification and coding was conducted manually. We had some differing opinions of the categories during the coding process, but with open discussion we always ended up in agreement of how to deal with the classes.

In the beginning, our purpose was to treat the authorities just as a big homogenous group including all the public authorities. We, however, noticed that the victims' experiences differed depending whether speaking of the police and legal system, their own lawyers, health care, child protection services or school personnel. That is why we decided to examine the victims' experiences of the authorities' actions separating all of the different above-mentioned authorities. This way we did not miss valuable information. In many comments, however, women did not specify which authorities they were talking about so for these kinds

of comments we created the sixth class of the authorities, concerning them as a homogenous group.

Concerning our second research question, our purpose was to find adaptive and constructive coping skills, which helped the victims to rebuild their mental well-being after stalking. When reading the material, we noticed that some of the victims told that they excluded the stalking experience and the negative feelings from their mind and they actually found it helpful. We ourselves did not consider these kinds of strategies as very constructive after all but because the participants felt that they were helpful in the recovery process, we decided to make one category of these coping skills. We also were about leave out the women's concrete actions aiming to enhance their safety, for example moving to a new place, because these strategies did not quite fit in our vision about adaptive coping skills. However, we noticed that these actions gave victims a sense of safety and this way helped them to build their new lives and recover from the stalking experience. This is why we included also these strategies in our analysis of the used coping skills.

### **3. RESULTS**

The victims of partner stalking took part in a network peer group conversation, where they had an opportunity to discuss their experiences during five weeks. From their comments, we looked for central themes that were then divided into categories. We ended up creating four main categories that described the victims' experiences regarding action taken by the authorities and the investigation process and four main categories to describe the coping skills adopted by the victims. The results are presented according to how the main categories appear in the data and what subcategories can be further identified from them.

We present text samples from each subcategory to demonstrate what they signify. Some statements could have been placed into more than just one exact subcategory but we allowed choosing only one subcategory for each statement. Some text samples have been shortened, meaning that irrelevant comments have been left out. The removed parts have been marked in the following way: (...). We have modified some of the text samples to secure the anonymity of the participants so that they could not be recognized based on the information included in their comments.

#### **3.1. Victims' experiences of the action taken by the authorities and the investigation process**

Our first research question addresses how the victims of partner stalking experienced the actions taken by the authorities and the investigation process. From the data, we chose victims' statements, which express opinions or experiences concerning the actions of the authorities or the investigation of the stalking process. We left out comments made by the participants, which only stated the relevant action without demonstrating how they felt about it. We found four clear main categories to answer our research question. The categories are:

- 1) Problems in dealing with stalking
- 2) Dissatisfaction with the investigation process

- 3) Trust in the authorities
- 4) Expectations regarding the actions of the authorities

The main categories and their subcategories are introduced more accurately below.

### **3.1.1. Problems in dealing with stalking**

Participants emphasized that the authorities have diverse difficulties in dealing with stalking. Four participants had experiences related to this category. Some authorities did not recognize these particular cases as stalking even when they were told about the situation by the victims. Some of them understood that something was going on but they did not deal with the situation in the way they should have. In some cases, the authorities recognized the situation as stalking but the victims felt that they did not receive adequate support from them or that the support was of wrong kind.

Most of the negative experiences in this category concerned the child protection personnel. Four participants referred to child protection services having problems in dealing with stalking. Two of the participants criticized the attitude of the police and two further participants condemned the approach of health personnel. One participant was critical of her lawyer and another generally emphasized the lacking skills of the authorities in dealing with stalking without specifying which authorities she meant.

1. Difficulties in recognizing stalking. Three participants had experiences that indicate a troublesome fact: many authorities still do not recognize stalking when facing it. Sometimes stalking was misinterpreted: the authorities for example thought that the situation was about a couple who were just arguing with each other.

#### *Extract 1*

*“I’m so let down by the unprofessional behavior of the authorities, that my inner voice underrates my experiences. If I have spoken about the experiences we have had, all of my experiences are always tried to be normalized or then I have been the irritating ex who tells tedious stories and even talks about stalking. (...) So we were tried to be put in a category of some quarrelsome couple, which was bizarre.”*

Participants also noted that sometimes the authorities do not recognize who fits the role of the perpetrator and that of the victim. The perpetrator was often so friendly to the authorities that



they chose to believe his words over the victim's, even though in reality the man was the one stalking his ex-wife. Stalkers also told the authorities a variety of lies about their ex-wives, which made the authorities question the victims' psychological health and capability to be a mother. On several occasions the authorities treated women the as if they were the guilty ones and were doing something wrong.

*Extract 2*

*"I don't understand how the authorities don't see who the real manipulator is."*

*Extract 3*

*"When it comes to my earlier experiences with child protection services, health care etc. they have judged me as being crazy/sick, revengeful, a bitter woman who treats her kids with violence."*

One of the participants noted that she understands that recognizing a case of stalking might be really difficult for the authorities; some of the victims' experiences might sound unrealistic to those not involved. Participants, however, highlighted that recognizing stalking by the authorities would be extremely important. If the authorities do not see the true magnitude of the situation, the victim is left alone in a very harmful and even dangerous situation and she lacks the help and support she would need to survive the experience.

2. Escaping responsibilities. Two participants mentioned having experiences of some authorities who did not take their responsibilities seriously when being told about stalking. Participants felt that the authorities somehow seemed to understand that there was a problem in the situation but they simply did not take steps to do anything about it, as they should have done. According to the participants, it was as if the authorities "washed their hands" from the situation, "turned their back" on the victim's agony or "fled their duties", either because they did not want to help the victim or they were too afraid to face the stalker.

*Extract 4*

*"My ex even got the employees to praise him even though he hit my youngest child there. Everything was presented in better light and the child protection notification was not filed because my ex had been so repentant."*

*Extract 5*

*“Child protection services were momentarily present because of the abuse but then they came to the conclusion that I don’t need their help. They were threatened by the enraged ex and after that they were not willing to help anymore.”*

3. Lack of suitable support. In this subcategory, the authorities seemed to understand that the situation involved stalking but they did not manage to give victims the support they would have needed. Even though in these cases the victim was recognized as a victim of stalking, the authorities handled the situation in a way that made the victim feel uncomfortable rather than relieved. Even if the authorities took action against the stalker, they did not treat the victim in the comforting and understanding way that she would have hoped for. Occasionally the victim was not properly informed about the progress in the case or the decisions made by the authorities, which would have been crucial for her well-being. Four participants felt that they lacked suitable support after telling the authorities about the stalking.

*Extract 6*

*“I realize I am exhausted by this threatening situation as well as the fact that as a mom I have to make such difficult decisions on my own, without having any guarantee of how the authorities will take action in the end!”*

There was one participant who mentioned getting some support from the authorities but the support was not what she would have needed. The victim did not like the way the authorities handled their situation: the victim received straight orders from the authorities that she was supposed to follow but no one asked her what she needed or wanted to be done. This offended her right to be heard and to make her own decisions.

*Extract 7*

*“I feel as though I have been acting like a robot ever since the child protection services got involved.”*

Furthermore, victims did not always know where they could get help. One participant was frustrated because she was concerned for her children but had no idea which authorities or which organization she could turn to. Because the victim lacked knowledge about who could help her, she did not receive the support she required.

*Extract 8*

*“Again, today I was searching for authorities who could advise us. It’s surprising that when the violence concerns children, there are no authorities who are willing to help. There is no organization which has the expertise to handle child protection cases.”*

In this subcategory, we include also statements in which victims express being dissatisfied with the actions of the authorities without specifically mentioning how their behavior has insulted them. Victims either mentioned having been traumatized by the way the authorities approached them or simply referred to having numerous bitter experiences concerning their co-operation with the authorities, without explaining this any further. In these statements the women did not directly express if they were or were not seen as victims of stalking, but we still ended up including these kinds of statements in this category, because they indicate that the victims did not receive the support they would have desperately needed.

*Extract 9*

*“The actions of the authorities have traumatized me even further and as a result, it is difficult for me to trust anyone anymore, but that is another story.”*

### **3.1.2. Dissatisfaction with the investigation process**

Four participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the stalking investigation. Some were dissatisfied with the way the investigation proceeded while others criticized the Finnish justice system in general. Out of all the different authorities the police and judicial authorities received the most criticism. All four participants in this category claimed to have negative experiences regarding the action taken by the police and judicial representatives in the investigation process. Moreover, one participant criticized the child protection services personnel. Another participant had complaints about health service personnel and yet another was dissatisfied with her lawyer’s actions in the investigation process.

1. Problems in the progress of the investigation. Three participants mentioned facing problems concerning the progress of the investigation. The investigation process was slow to start, and the victims did not always receive enough information about the process and how it was to proceed. Furthermore, the co-operation between different authorities participating in the investigation process did not run smoothly.

*Extract 10*

*“I haven’t gotten any information from the police, when the investigation begins or whether it ever will. Child protection services can’t reputedly do anything before the police has specified how they will proceed. And if the police doesn’t inform them by Thursday next week, I will be forced to decide how I will arrange my children’s visits.”*

Some participants also mentioned that the investigation did not proceed in the way they had hoped. One participant told that she herself had accidentally compromised the investigation because she had led her children to say certain things without realizing it. In some cases the investigation failed in the eyes of the victim because the authorities or her lawyer compromised the investigation with their actions.

*Extract 11*

*“I am deeply disappointed about the custody trial. My lawyer didn’t handle the case as he should have and this led to the judge deciding that joint custody be upheld. I didn’t get the chance to present the evidence I already had because my lawyer totally ruined the case.”*

2. Criticism towards the justice system. Four participants criticized the Finnish judicial system for protecting the perpetrator rather than the victim. Having problems with defending oneself led to feelings of powerlessness and frustration. One common shared experience in this subcategory was that proving that stalking is taking place is made too difficult for the victim: they have to gather an array of evidence to prove their case, while stalkers instead do not seem to need much evidence when accusing their victims. Moreover, gathering proofs was experienced psychically challenging in the stressful circumstances.

*Extract 12*

*“It’s strange that he is free to accuse me for a variety of reasons without proper proof and I have to gather a lot of evidence to support my words.”*

One participant used strong language when talking about the procedure in court. She felt powerless when forced to listen to false accusations towards herself and not having the chance to properly defend herself:

*Extract 13*

*“In court, I had to listen many kinds of smear campaign and clear lies about myself. The worst part is that you can’t defend yourself in court and the process goes on in a certain circle and if you forget to say something it is already over.”*

One participant also brought forth her experiences about the judicial system not being able to protect the victims from the stalker:

*Extract 14*

*“All my ex currently does is continuously suing me over our children’. It’s a form of legal harassment and stalking. I have been quite angry that the judicial system is completely incapable to protect me from this unnecessary suing.”*

### **3.1.3. Trust in the authorities**

Although many participants in our study brought forth negative experiences of the actions taken by the authorities, they also mentioned some good experiences as well. Six participants mentioned experiencing encouraging comments, eye-opening interventions or feelings of being understood by the authorities in the stalking process. In some cases, however, this happened only after many negative meetings with authorities or when moving to a new locality.

Most of the positive experiences seemed to be related to health services personnel: five out of six people mentioned being understood and encouraged by their psychologists, occupational health nurses or other health personnel. Three people also had good experiences regarding their lawyers. Two people referred to being treated well by the police and justice personnel and one person by child protection services. One participant brought up her positive memories about support from school on several occasions. Two people mentioned getting good treatment from the authorities without mentioning which authorities they were talking about.

1. Praise. Three participants had received praiseworthy comments from the authorities. Though praise may seem like a rather small gesture, it had a significant effect on victims’ ability to cope. It made them feel better about themselves, got them to appreciate their own survival and helped them to keep on going regardless of their tough life situations.

*Extract 15*

*“Considering everything, the most appreciated words possibly came from my occupational health nurse, who said that she admires me; I have been brave and strong. She admires me for having had the courage to act and not having stayed in that situation anymore.”*

2. Opening the eyes of the victim. Two victims had not quite understood that the situation they were involved in was stalking. Only after the authorities opened their eyes by intervening in the situation did victims begin to understand the severity of their recent happenings. In these cases, the victims felt that the intervention by the authorities was pivotal for them because it helped them to realize the gravity of the situation.

*Extract 16*

*“I know the feeling when you convince yourself that something bad can’t possibly happen to you anymore and the moment you realize that the situation really is severe after all. I needed advice and interference from the authorities to realize that.”*

3. Received understanding and support. Five participants claimed that some authorities understood and believed them when they reported stalking. This led to the situation where the authorities tried to help the victim and put an end to stalking by for example imposing a restraining order or convicting the stalker. It was especially important for the victims that the authorities recognized the situation for what it truly was – severe and harmful for the victim. Victims felt gratitude and relief when this acknowledgement took place, partly because this is not necessarily considered a self-evident course of action in a stalking case.

*Extract 17*

*“(…) I have a lovely doctor, who understands my situation and has guided me to therapy where I now go.”*

*Extract 18*

*“Now that I live in a new area I have finally gotten the support and help which I would have expected earlier. Things are clicking into place and the authorities act the way they are supposed to.”*

### 3.1.4. Expectations regarding the actions of the authorities

This category consists of participants predicting how the authorities would deal with their stalking or how the co-operation between the victim and the authorities would develop. Four people, instead of reflecting on their past experiences, commented on how they expected the authorities to act in the future. Most of the comments indicated prevalent mistrust in the authorities: participants, for example, believed that the authorities would not take appropriate actions to help them or that they would take the stalker's side. However, one participant expressed her confidence in the authorities and seemed to believe that they would also help her in the future.

One participant was cynical about the future concerning the actions taken by the police and two people expressed their concern about child protection services. Two people commented on their negative expectations regarding the future actions taken by the authorities, while one person felt reassured although she did not mention which authorities she was talking about.

1. Negative expectations. Four people gave comments about not trusting the authorities to believe them when being told about stalking or to handle their situation in the future the way they should. This can be explained by the numerous negative experiences regarding the past actions of the authorities, which understandably influenced the victims' expectations concerning the future.

*Extract 19*

*“At the same time, because I am terrified that no one is going to believe me I’m acting as though like I were lying, even when I’m telling the truth.”*

*Extract 20*

*“My firstborn has had a black eye a couple of times when coming back home from his dad’s. I have been at the doctor’s and reported the incident to social welfare but they can easily think that this is just some form of post-break-up bullying.”*

2. Positive expectations. One person told she trusted the authorities to take actions and to handle her situation appropriately. This was because the authorities had immediately believed her when she had told them about stalking and they had taken steps to secure her safety.

### Extract 21

*“I currently feel confident about the authorities at the moment. As soon as we broke up, I asked the police for advice about what to do. Now that there are thousands of messages which include number of threats, the authorities are trying to protect us so that there wouldn’t happen a familicide.”*

## **3.2. Coping skills used for surviving stalking**

Our second research question concerns the kinds of coping skills the victims used for surviving partner stalking. In the analysis, we only included comments in which victims mentioned some form of benefit from the coping skill in question or where we could justifiably argue her benefiting from it. We left out the comments about coping skills, which had not helped the victims to survive. We identified four categories from our data to answer this research question:

- 1) Inner processing
- 2) External support
- 3) Security measures
- 4) Orientation for the future.

The main categories and their subcategories are presented below.

### **3.2.1. Inner processing**

One of the most essential coping mechanisms consists of the victims’ inner processing concerning stalking experience. In this main category, the active role of the victim was emphasized when coping with the experiences of stalking. All of the six active participants mentioned using some forms of inner working as a useful tool for coping. This main category consisted of six different subcategories that are described below.

1. Recognizing and accepting the feelings. Five victims discussed the importance of recognizing, naming and releasing all kinds of emotions. It had helped victims to carry on and it gave them a lot of new power to deal with the situation. Anger turned out to be the most evident feeling in the conversations. Members of the peer group shared experiences of



facing the anger and gave others tips about how to deal with it. Many had been able to face the anger with the help of their therapist, for example, and the anger was regarded as a key element in the recovery process. Besides anger, there were also feelings of strong guilt, fear of what might happen, frustration and exhaustion of the never-ending nature of the situation.

After the victims had recognized and accepted their anger, they tried to find ways to express it. One participant for example wrote letters to the stalker together with her children. Even though they never sent the letters, they considered writing down their feelings bluntly very helpful. Another way to express anger was to throw away the things that reminded the victim about stalking.

*Extract 22*

*“The feeling of anger has become familiar and its recognition has been relatively easy but accepting it is difficult. When I gave myself permission to feel anger; it first came out in the form of cry. It evolved into an “outburst of rage”, which led to the urge to be clean my entire house. All the objects and clothes that reminded of the past and him had to go. (...) The feeling of anger has transformed into perseverance, which has given me renewed energy.”*

One of the participants had even profoundly contemplated death and accepted that there was a possibility of dying when the stalking was taking a place. This well represents how dangerous stalking truly is: it can be so extreme that it severely threatens the life of the victim and her family.

*Extract 23*

*“Accepting death as a part of life also helps. I haven't been at all sure if we are going to survive alive from the future misfortunes. Even so, I try to live in the moment to the greatest extent possible.”*

2. Rationalizing the situation. One significant strategy when coping with stalking was to rationalize the situation. This was mentioned by three of the victims. The victims searched for different kinds of information from books and the internet, for example, in order to understand what was happening to them. They also tried to rationalize their life incidents by sharing their stalking experiences and reading about others' in the peer group conversations. In the beginning, it was not necessarily clear for these women that they were victims of stalking. It was helpful for them to read, listen and talk about stalking and to realize that the situation was not their fault - it could have happened to anyone.

*Extract 24*

*“Understanding this really helped me. In a way, I got permission to grieve the failed relationship. And at the same time, I could accept that perhaps this did not mean that the person was completely bad, but rather only the part of him which had been abused.”*

*Extract 25*

*“It took me long to understand that these things that have happened have been a part of stalking. I am not crazy after all, from this I am able to see how extreme the mental abuse has been; since I have started to believe his words.”*

3. Fighting for oneself. Five victims felt that they had to fight for themselves and their family. Some of them had earlier felt powerless to defend themselves and their children, due to the fact that they were too kind-hearted. Guilt was a barrier for many of them to recognize what they deserve. Shared experiences, support from others and recognizing the active role they must take to survive from situation pushed them to set boundaries for what they will stand from their former husbands and the authorities. A certain kind of assertiveness and believing in themselves helped them to get the strength to defend their opinions and fight for their rights.

*Extract 26*

*“I have also noticed that I’m too kind, and now I have practiced standing up for myself more. For example, when arguing about the custody of the children I stood up for myself and refused certain things (for example visits every wknd; I also have the right to spend weekends with my children) and I expressed my own opinion more decisively.”*

*Extract 27*

*“I have also repeatedly told myself that if someone managed to survive the concentration camps, I can survive this.”*

4. Protecting the mind. Two victims spoke about protecting their minds from the painful experiences when dealing with stalking. It helped them to remain sane in the situation. Protecting the mind included different kinds of variations: unconscious defense mechanisms as well as conscious decisions to avoid feelings they were not able to handle. One of the victims felt that she could not have handled everything so well if she had let herself think too much and expressed her emotions. She realized that avoiding the feelings was not favorable and that it even felt scary to do so. However, she still emphasized its importance for her daily coping.

Extract 28

*“I definitely realize that my mind already offers me protection, because to the outside it looks as if nothing were going on. I talk yet I don’t feel anything... That’s also scary, because that’s not normal. If I were able to feel, I wouldn’t be able to cope with this.”*

5. Mercy and forgiveness. Some victims felt ashamed about having ended up being stalked and felt guilty for their children’s suffering and for their lack of courage to leave earlier. Four victims told it was important for them to stop chasing perfection, to accept their imperfections in themselves and to see that they were good mothers despite having been the victim of stalking. When women finally learned to forgive themselves, they also started to liberate themselves from the feelings of guilt and shame. They started to recognize their own worth and that they were doing the best they could considering the circumstances.

Extract 29

*“So, I have always done and tried my best. For that reason, I try to accept the fact that life has its limits and that I have my faults and, having accepted that I try to be merciful towards myself.”*

For many of them forgiving themselves was a very meaningful step in their recovery process. In addition to forgiving themselves, some of the participants even spoke about forgiving the stalker in order to let go of the hate they felt and to carry on with their life.

Extract 30

*“Everything probably starts from being able to forgive yourself and maybe the hardest step is, that you are able to forgive the person, who has harmed you.”*

6. Talking and sharing. Two victims mentioned the crucialness of speaking about the situation. It did not matter who was listening but it was necessary to speak about the stalking to someone who was ready to listen. It helped victims to share their experiences and to feel as though they were being heard. Being able to talk about the psychically painful stalking experiences was not easy for the victims, which is why having the courage to speak about it was experienced as very meaningful in terms of coping.

Extract 31

*“For many years, I had this enormous need to share this experience. I spoke to pretty much anyone who would listen. Now that I have overcome my problems, it’s almost embarrassing that I have shared so many of our issues. I still believe, that if I hadn’t shared the burden, I wouldn’t have survived.”*

### 3.2.2. External support

Support and encouragement from others gave victims strength and persistence to cope with the stalking. All six active participants mentioned this kind of support as being essential for them. It was important for them to have people around them and especially to be believed and understood. Many times, the authorities were incapable of giving the victims the support they required but friends and family, health care professionals and peer group members stood by them. This way victims eventually got the sense of not being alone.

1. Peer support. This study was based on the peer support network group which six of the participants found to be meaningful in their coping. It was a place where the victims could feel safe and have conversations about their stalking and get insight by reading other's comments. Concrete tips and advice regarding safety and court proceedings were actively shared. Praise, friendly support and understanding were considered essential. From their peers, they got the strength to carry on. Some participants brought up the fact that it was also sad and stressful to read about other's stories. Furthermore, the group was found to be an invaluable form of support and it gave the victims a sense of not having been abandoned.

Peer support was also considered meaningful because the participants could not always talk about the stalking with their friends as freely as they would have wanted to. They did not want to burden their close friends too much. In the peer group conversations, however, the participants felt freer to openly speak about their experiences, as they know that there were people who had experienced same kinds of incidents and had struggled with similar thoughts and feelings.

#### *Extract 32*

*“It is wonderful and at the same time awful to hear that I’m not the only one having these feelings and thoughts. It is strange how the effect of having heard only a couple of shared experiences is already so empowering.”*

2. Professional help. Another significant form of external support for five victims was professional help, which was typically offered by a therapist. Therapists, psychologists and other health care providers were able to give victims the type of support and advice that they did not get from the other authorities. They helped these women to manage the difficult emotions and to deal with the traumas caused by the stalking. In therapy the victims also had

the chance to handle their other strenuous experiences linked to the stalking or their earlier life. By being offered professional help victims could better understand and rationalize the events, see the consequences of stalking and learn how to constructively deal with it.

*Extract 33*

*"I have attended psychotherapy for three years, which has been a rescue. I have grown stronger and gained endurance and I have thus been able to deal with the difficult experiences of my childhood. I have also gotten rid of the guilt that I felt about ending up in a violent relationship."*

Many participants also thanked attendants about their active and invaluable role in the group. The support received from attendants was slightly different from the support received from other victims. Participants felt understood and received friendly words from the attendants, which in turn helped them to get on with their lives. However, some participants also stated that the attendants had helped them to understand stalking, the behavior of the stalker and their own reactions in the stalking.

*Extract 34*

*"Thank you, attendants for mercifulness, understanding and correct interpretations! (...) luckily the attendants as wise women have been a blessing for us! Personally, I am still grateful for the support I got when our life was yet again in crisis!"*

3. Family and friends. In addition to the support referred to earlier, family and friends were considered meaningful supporters according to four of the victims. They were compassionate towards the victims, helping them to survive on a daily basis. Sometimes it was a friend or a family member who had opened the victim's eyes to the stalking. In one case, the victim did not at first get necessary support from her family - her mother had difficulties in believing her story and persistently advised her to get back with her ex-husband for their children's sake. Only later did she understand the dangerous situation. Apart from a few experiences about some family members or friends abandoning the victims, the participants of our study nonetheless highlighted the significance of the received support from their inner circle and expressed a lot of gratitude towards their loved ones.

*Extract 35*

*"My own parents and sisters have been wonderfully supportive and I'm very grateful that I have them as well as friends, who have been able to support and understand."*

### 3.2.3. Security measures

In order to cope with the stalking, victims had to feel safe before being able to concentrate on other things. There were two kinds of ways to secure the safety: by securing the house and by trying to achieve a sense of safety outside the home. Six victims mentioned helpful security measures they had used during and after the stalking which had helped them cope.

1. Securing the home. This was a relevant coping mechanism for four victims. They used various means of protecting their houses, including shutting and blocking electronic devices in order to stop the stalker from spying on them, getting a watchdog to keep an eye on the house and changing phone numbers. This well represents how far the victims had to go in their attempt to keep themselves and their families safe.

*Extract 36*

*“I reserved another watchdog for us yesterday. I already have an old German shepherd, which guards and protects. The Shepherd moves with us and sleeps inside. This new dog, on the other hand, is an outdoor dog who doesn’t let anyone on its territory. I believe that with this combination we will be able to live here in the future. Both are big dog breeds and can already at the age of 6 months be convincing enough for us to feel safe.”*

*Extract 37*

*“Now the home is protected. There is no computer, tablet, modem or router. I have blocked the TV and I changed my phone as well as the number. I disconnected the location-service on the phone.”*

2. Ensuring the safety outside the home. Four victims also mentioned ways of protecting themselves and their children outside their current home. Even though restraining orders were not seen as being useful in all cases, they still gave some participants a sense of safety when walking on the streets alone. If the women could not feel safe in their current home or area, they needed to use tactics such as going to a women’s shelter for help or moving to locality new place. Relief and a sense of safety were typical feelings when being at women’s shelters and moving to a new city.

*Extract 38*

*“The best part about being in a women’s shelter has been seeing my children feel peaceful and safe. After all, children of all ages sense how their mom is feeling and then react to it.”*

*Extract 39*

*“Moving to another city has been a blessing for us. For the first time, we lived free of my ex, who did not want to meet his children, because he sued me, trying to get children to live with him. The children began to recover and for the first time in my life I saw them happy and free.”*

A shared experience for the victims was their constant worry about the unpredictability of what might happen and what they could do to prevent the worst possible scenario. One of the victims had to come up with a “safe word” that her child could use if being threatened. The existence of the safety word was relieving for the participant. She knew that if her child used it on the phone when she was at her father’s, she would immediately know that her child was in trouble and she would have the chance to get help.

*Extract 40*

*“We made an agreement with my daughter that if she called me by her friend’s name on the phone I would call the emergency telephone number.”*

### **3.2.4. Orientation for the future**

Little by little, the women started to turn their attention from their past experiences to the future. They did not want to be haunted by their past so focusing on the future was essential for seven of the participants. Despite the stalking, they had to cope with the normal daily routines as well as the changes in their daily life. Many of them started to pursue their dreams and to find time for their hobbies. They wanted to be good mothers for their children and some of them saw motherhood as being a good enough reason for them to carry on. For many, simply believing in a better future helped. They felt that hoping and having faith in things getting better was truly important in order to cope with the situation.

1. Reconstructing daily life. For five participants, it was necessary to hold on to their daily routines and adapt them to the situation. Many of them had to learn to develop new ways to manage by themselves with their children. Concentrating on living as normal a life as possible was important for them and helped them to move forward bit by bit towards a better everyday life.

*Extract 41*

*“I still have had to live the normal life, because that’s what has kept me sane.”*

Extract 42

*“Getting used to a new daily routine took time getting used to in our case, too. First, we woke up on time, got dressed and tried to remember to brush our hair and once we accomplished that, we started to brush our teeth and take vitamins, too. We considered the things that would make daily life easier, picking out clothes in the evening (my daughter always has a clothing crisis in the morning; and the clothes that had been chosen the day before aren’t suitable anymore in the morning), preparing the food and placing it in the fridge, me time; even if it just 5 minutes, in the mornings.”*

2. Concentrating on one’s own well-being. Along with reconstructing daily life, maintaining their own personal well-being was experienced as being significant by six of the participants. During the recovery process the victims started to recognize their own worth and to follow their dreams. They realized how important it is to take care of oneself in order to be able to have a happy new life and to take better care of their children. Many of them considered hobbies to be relaxing and enjoyable and to be stress-relieving. The goal for the victims was to finally feel better regardless of everything that had happened to them.

Extract 43

*“I found happiness from within and I also have begun to fulfil the dreams that I didn’t have the courage to fulfil before. I also realized that I wasn’t in the right profession and after the divorce, I have sort of had to reorganize my life. I’m studying to be a nurse (specializing in mental health-care) and it has been wonderful to realize that I am finally where I need to be.”*

Extract 44

*“Additionally, my hobbies, running, dancing and climbing bring me joy. I exercise so that, in addition to taking care of my children, I take care of myself and so that I’m healthier.”*

3. Concentrating on children and motherhood. For three of the victims, their children were what kept them going. The women were exhausted because of the stalking and giving up sometimes seemed like a desirable choice, but they realized that they had to handle the situation for the sake of their children. Motherhood gave them meaning in life, and they set it as their objective to secure their children’s future. The women realized that their children depended on them and this gave them the will and strength to cope. They wanted to succeed in their role as mother as best they could.

Extract 45

*“For my children’s sake and for my own survival it has been necessary to use all the wisdom I have (...) I simply strive to be the best mother for my children.*



*And I try to gather all my strength, because my children are so broken, that I know I will still be needed.”*

4. Faith in a better future. Sometimes all that these women had left, was hope for a better future, which was mentioned by five participants. Gratitude for the good things in life, maintaining a positive attitude and avoiding bitterness were typical ways for participants to express their faith in the future. The situation sometimes seemed impossible to cope with, but they still wanted to believe that things would eventually get better. Thinking positively was crucial for participants in order to have a better life.

*Extract 46*

*“I hope that some-day things will change for the better. In this case I hope and believe, even though it still feels impossible and as though it would last forever. This may never happen, but I hope for the better.”*

*Extract 47*

*“There is probably still a long journey ahead, but I believe that eventually everything will turn out for the better.”*

## **4. DISCUSSION**

This study was a part of the Finnish VARJO-project, which was carried out during 2012-2016. The project was executed in co-operation with VIOLA – a women’s association for breaking free from violence and a women's shelter in Oulu. The data for this study consisted of an internet conversation material of a peer group for stalked women. In the conversations victims of partner stalking collectively discussed their stalking experiences. A total of ten women participated in the conversations initially and eight of them participated in our study.

The purpose of this study was to increase knowledge about the victims’ experiences of the actions of the authorities and the investigation process in partner stalking and the coping skills victims consider useful in their attempt to survive from stalking. Our first research question was “How do victims of partner stalking experience the actions of the authorities and the investigation process?” and our second research question was “What kind of coping skills do victims of partner stalking use to survive the stalking experience?”. We used content analysis as our research method to find answers to these questions.

### **4.1. Victims’ experiences of the action taken by the authorities and the investigation process**

We identified four main categories from our data to describe how the victims had experienced the actions of different authorities and the investigation process during the stalking. These categories were: problems in dealing with stalking, dissatisfaction with the investigation process, trust in the authorities and expectations regarding the actions of the authorities.

Many of the participants in our study indicated that they were very disappointed in the authorities and some of the victims even described being traumatized due to their negative experiences. It has been indicated that the authorities have problems in handling stalking cases (Logan & Walker, 2010), which was also evident in our study. Occasionally, the authorities failed to recognize the stalking and confused it with other phenomena, such as

normal arguments in an intimate relationship. In some cases, victims felt that the authorities recognized the act of stalking, but they did not want to help the victim or have the courage to confront the stalker. Some victims also felt that the authorities recognized the situation the way it was but did not offer the victim enough support, or the support they provided did not meet the victim's needs.

The authorities often seem incapable to deal with stalking. In many of the stalking cases in our study, stalking was not recognized and the victim was not believed, which is possibly the worst thing that could happen to the victims as they try to get help. Acknowledging the victims' subjective reality should be recognized when meeting the victims (Nikupeteri, 2016), yet very often their experiences were undervalued and they did not get any sympathy or help from the authorities, which would have been crucial for their safety and well-being.

Due to the dismissive responses of the authorities, some victims even began to question their serious situation. It is challenging enough to take steps to tell other people about stalking, but this kind of negative attitude keeps eroding victims' trust in the authorities even more. Having encountered this kind of belittling response, victims are more unlikely to turn to the authorities in the future, even if they were to need help desperately. The authorities not recognizing stalking is alarming: if they do not intervene, the harassment is going to continue and the victim is left alone to survive the harmful consequences.

Participants also talked about the authorities avoiding their responsibilities. Extreme examples of this were identified in the victims' stories. One participant claimed that her ex-husband had talked to psychologists about his desire to kill his whole family and the victim felt threatened and was terrified, yet the psychologists did not take the case seriously. If the authorities recognize that the stalking is taking place but do not want or have the courage to do anything to help the victim, they neglect their responsibilities very severely. In the worst case, this form of neglect can do serious and irreversible harm to the victim and other people involved in the case. As some of the participants described, the experience of not getting any help from the people who the victim thought she could rely on and turn to, may be even more traumatic than the terrifying act of stalking itself.

In some cases, the participant was indeed identified as a victim of partner stalking and the authorities intervened, but the support the victim received from the authorities somehow made her feel uncomfortable. The support was inadequate or it was not the kind victim would have needed in the situation. Victim's right to make her decisions herself was not always respected by the authorities. Sometimes concrete actions taken from the authorities with the aim of stopping the stalking are insufficient. Moreover, the victims of partner stalking also expect open-mindedness, warmth, understanding and advice concerning the ordeal they have been going through. All this would require the improvement of ethical and moral skills of the professionals (Nikupeteri, 2016).

The fact that the authorities are unable to recognize stalking and that they fail to fulfil their responsibilities and provide the victim with the support she needs potentially results from their inexperience or inadequate training related to cases of stalking. If they have not encountered cases of stalking previously, they may not recognize the phenomenon (Lynch & Logan, 2015) and may disregard the most important clues in the situation. Sometimes the stories of the victims can sound unimaginable in the ears of third parties, which is why they might be hard to believe if one has not met this kind of action before. The stalker's behavior may not be visible to outsiders, but these should not go unnoticed and should be identified as violent behavior (Nikupeteri, 2016). It is also possible that the professionals are manipulated by the stalker without realizing it. In other words, the stalker intentionally deceives the helpers by distorting reality and making the victim look like the perpetrator (Nikupeteri, 2016). This phenomenon was also identified in our study, whereby the authorities mistook the stalker for an innocent person.

Some of the participants criticized the investigation process: in some cases, the investigation was slow to start and it was unclear to the victims how it was to proceed. A few participants also criticized the justice system of Finland, claiming that the system protects the perpetrator rather than the victim. The women felt that the system fails to defend the victim from the stalker, and the victims also pointed out that it is made too challenging to gather enough evidence to prove that stalking is taking place. It is evident that the reality of stalking is difficult to prove (Lynch & Logan, 2015). Due to the threatening circumstances, the victim may not consider or realize the importance of gathering evidence. This is why the active role of the authorities is emphasized: they should advise the victim to gather the necessary proof very early on (Logan & Walker, 2010; Lynch & Logan, 2015). Gathering the evidence is a

significant way for the victims to indicate the danger they and their children are in and for the stalker to be punished.

Some of the participants of the study commented on how they expected the authorities to handle their case in the future. Most of the victims identified in this category predicted that the authorities probably would not believe or support them. This kind of prevalent mistrust against the actions of the authorities probably stems from the several negative experiences they have had in the past. However, not all of the comments were negative. One person pointed out that she trusts the authorities to handle the stalking well. This attitude was based on her good experiences with the authorities, who had believed and helped her from the beginning.

Occasionally, the authorities were seen as active helpers who praised and encouraged the victims and took the reins to handle the situation. Some participants even mentioned the authorities as having been the ones to open their eyes to the reality of the stalking. In some cases, the victims were believed and supported and the issue of their safety was taken seriously. Even though in many of the cases it was difficult for the authorities to recognize the severity of the situation and to detect who was telling the truth, there were also those who managed to understand that the victims were in a real danger and that they really were stalked by their former spouses. However, it should be noted that many women claimed to have had number of negative experiences with the authorities before they were taken seriously. For some victims, moving to another area resulted in a significant turn in their life because in a new place they finally got the support from the authorities they had always hoped for.

What is remarkable is that most of the negative experiences concerned the actions of the police and other criminal justice representatives and child protection services, whereas most of the good experiences regarded health care providers, like psychologists and doctors. Moreover, one participant gave school a lot of positive feedback. These results support the findings of earlier studies, which indicate that victims of stalking are unsatisfied with the attitude and actions of the police and justice system personnel (Brewster, 2001; Geistman, 2009; Melton, 2000; Nikupeteri, 2016) and that criminal justice representatives take stalking less seriously than victim service representatives (Logan & Walker, 2010). Based on these results, health care services and teachers seem to be better trained to recognize stalking than the police and child protection services.

Health care professionals might have been better trained to recognize stalking which is why they are more sensitive to the situation and better able to recognize stalking as a phenomenon. Furthermore, health care professionals might have a better understanding of the different symptoms and the likely reasons behind them, which in turn might help them to see the bigger picture. Teachers, on other hand, have the chance to monitor the children on a long-term basis, which might be why they can easily detect the changes in the children's behavior and the symptoms arising from stalking.

It has been shown that men are more likely to excuse and blame victims for the stalking, whereas women tend to take stalking cases more seriously (Lambert et al., 2013; McKeon et al., 2015). The fact that majority of police officers tend to be men (Geistman, 2009), might partly explain why it is difficult for them to view stalking from the victim's perspective. Most health-care professionals in turn are mostly women, which might be one reason why they are more likely to understand the ordeal of the victims and take stalking seriously.

Many of the participants in this study had heard the phrase about that "It always takes two to tango", which means that the victims were blamed for the conflict. It is not unusual that the stalker manages to manipulate the authorities so that he is seen as the "good" one (Nikupeteri, 2016). This again highlights the professionals' insufficient understanding about the various aspects of stalking. However, it is extremely important for people to realize that violence and stalking are not part of a normal relationship and it only takes one person to do them both. Stalking causes harm to the victim's well-being in several ways (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007; Hall, 1998; Logan & Walker, 2009; Sheridan et al., 2003) and can include such dangerous behavior that even threatens the life of the victim (Sheridan et al., 2003).

However, it should be noted that that the victim's experiences about the actions of the authorities were not completely black and white. The same participant might have had a number of different experiences with several authorities during the whole stalking process. Many participants had both negative and positive concerning their meetings with the authorities. Many women had received support, understanding and help from the authorities. However, the negative experiences stood out more clearly from the data. The results of our study support earlier studies in that the authorities do not seem to understand the real nature

of stalking (Brewster, 2001; Logan & Walker, 2010; Melton, 2000) and that in the future they definitely must be educated more carefully about stalking and how to act when facing it (Lynch & Logan, 2015; McKeon et al., 2015).

Stalkers are skilled at making their victims look like the guilty party and as though they had many problems, which is why professionals need to be taught to expect this kind of behavior and to be educated how to deal with it (Nikupeteri, 2016; Spence-Diehl, 2003). In the future, it would also be necessary for the authorities to listen to the victim, ask her directly what kind of support she needs in the situation and to take her needs into account when planning how to deal with the stalking case. This need for a better education about stalking applies to all authorities but according to our study, this pertains especially to the police and other justice system representatives as well as child protection services.

## **4.2. Coping skills used for surviving stalking**

We identified four main categories in our data to answer the question of what kind of coping skills the victims used to survive stalking and foster their well-being after the traumatizing events. These categories consist of the following: inner processing, external help, security measures and orientation for the future.

One important coping skill that clearly stood out from the data was the victim's own inner processing, which is realized by recognizing and accepting one's own feelings, rationalizing the situation, fighting for oneself, protecting the mind, being capable for showing mercifulness and forgiveness and talking openly about the stalking. The active role of the victim was considered significant for surviving. Inner processing helped victims come to terms with the situation, their own role and that of the stalker in it and their reactions to the stalking experiences. By reflecting on the stalking experience in their own mind, victims also learned a lot about themselves and how they wanted to live their lives in the future. This category encompasses a bit of the inner shelter that Nikupeteri (2016) considers important when dealing the difficult emotions in threatening situations as well as in the daily routines.

It was crucial for victims that there was external support available to them when they needed it. Support from family, friends and professionals was considered very meaningful and it helped victims to keep going in their lives. Professional help was usually provided by therapists or other health care providers who helped victims to deal with their traumatic stalking experiences, which in turn allowed victims to start recovering. The professionals provided victims with information about stalking, which helped them to understand the behavior of the stalker and their own different reactions. In therapy, victims also had the chance to discuss and come to terms about other harmful events from their earlier life. A safe and confidential relationship with health-care professionals is seen to prevent long-lasting harm and helping victim to recover from the stalking (Mullen et al., 2009; Pathé et al., 2001). Moreover, the participants of our study claimed to have greatly benefitted from their therapy contacts.

From the different forms of external support, the internet peer support group was acknowledged to be a significant support factor. Many of the participants gave a lot of positive feedback about the group action and expressed their interest in a follow-up group. With the help of the discussions on the internet, the victims had the chance to share their own stalking experiences and to read about others', to consider the characteristics of the stalking phenomenon together and to share how they all had ended up being stalked. The victims supported each other by sometimes directing their comments and sympathy towards a specific person. This meant that participants received meaningful personal support. The victims strengthened due to the support of the other participants and thanks to the fact that they realized they were not alone.

Though many of the participants received a lot of understanding and support from their inner circle, some victims felt abandoned by their friends and family. It is typical for third parties to be affected by or be involved in partner stalking (Sheridan & Davies, 2001). In fact, participants in this study also mentioned family members and friends who were affected by the harassment. On the other hand, when the stalking behavior was not directed towards third parties, it was difficult for some of the victim's friends or family members to believe that the victim's spouse could be a stalker. It is extremely exhausting for the victim when even the closest people in her life do not believe her and she fails to get their support. Due to the possibility of this occurring, there should be a guarantee on the authorities' side to support the victim.



Certain security measures helped victims to achieve a sense of safety in their lives, which in turn helped them to survive the stalking experience and to start focusing on their well-being. Some of the security measures helped victims to secure their own houses or apartments, so that they did not have to fear the stalker when at home. They could, for example, turn off their electronic devices or change their phone numbers, so that the stalker could not spy on them via computer. These seem to be a rather commonly used coping strategies among the victims of stalking (Brewster, 2001; Nicastro et al., 2000). Security measures can thus be useful in terms of coping but they can also be perceived as a threat when benefitted at the hands of the stalker (Nikupeteri, 2016). Sometimes victims needed to resort to tactics to secure their safety outside of their current home by, for example applying a restraining order for the stalker, going to a women's shelter for a while or moving to a completely new city to start a new life. Moving away is perceived to be a rather productive way to cope with stalking (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004), and this was in fact the case for many of the participants in our study, too.

Achieving a sense of safety during and after the terrifying stalking seemed to be important for the victims so that they could start recovering from the harmful events they had experienced. Very often victims felt abandoned when trying to protect themselves, because the authorities did not always understand the severity of the situation and failed to protect the victim in their part. Earlier studies have also shown, that the police lack the information about the significance of safety planning in securing victims' safety in the stalking process (Logan & Walker, 2010). The fact that some of the victims needed to use radical strategies such moving to another city to protect themselves and their children, clearly indicates how much fear the stalker really awakened in them with his behavior and how serious the situation truly was.

One coping skill that was also mentioned several times in the conversations was their orientation for the future rather than the past. Participants slowly began to return to their everyday routines and began to take better care of their well-being. Many of the victims mentioned wanting to fully focus on their children and on trying to be good mothers. Even though the victims had suffered a lot and experienced extremely harmful and even dangerous events, they were still able to think positively and believe that something better was in store for them in the future.

Lazarus and Folkman (1980) have divided coping strategies into two different categories: emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping. Both of these coping strategies showed up in our study. Many of the coping skills we found, can be placed in the category of problem-focused coping: the victims took an active role and tried to do something about the situation that caused the stress. They for example tried to secure their safety with different kind of tactics. The fact that many of the coping skills we found were forms of problem-focused coping is understandable, as we specifically searched for constructive coping skills which had helped the victims to survive stalking. There were, however, also some examples of emotion-focused coping: some victims for example tried to protect their mind from the painful feelings by avoiding and refusing to face them. It is understandable that some of the victims adopted emotion-focused coping considering that stalking typically results in a sense of loss of control on the victim's part.

Cupach and Spitzberg (2004) have presented five categories of coping skills used by victims suffering from stalking: moving inward, moving against, moving with, moving outward and moving away. Strategies such as moving inward, moving outward and moving away were evident in our study as well. In our study, moving inward appeared as a coping skill of inner processing, moving outward as external support and moving away as a security measure for ensuring safety outside the home. Moving against was also found in our data in the form of victims' desire to convict the stalker for his behavior. In other words, it was evident in our study but not recognized as a coping skill. Moving with was not found in our data. It is likely that the victims used the moving with -strategy when the stalking was more acute. When the conversations were taking place, the victims were further along in their recovery process, which might be why they did not need to resort to tactics like this anymore. This might explain why it did not stand out in our data.

In our analysis, we only included coping skills, which had somehow helped the victims survive their stalking experiences. Participants also mentioned some coping skills they had tried out but which had not helped. For some, moving to a new city had been a smart move and given them the chance to start a new life, but one participant who mentioned having moved to another area concluded that it had not been a useful coping tactic for her – the stalking was still ongoing despite the move. One of the participants in turn had installed a security system in her home, but it did not really give her any sense of safety because she knew it would not stop the stalker from coming in, if he wanted to.

Our study shows that victims of partner stalking tend to use different kinds of constructive coping skills when trying to survive and recover from stalking. They reflected on their own experiences, relied on available external support, used different security measures to increase their sense of safety and orientated themselves towards the future. Even though the active role of the victim herself in the recovery process was highlighted, the support received from other people was found to be very meaningful. It is especially important for the victim that the people around her believe her, try to understand what she is going through and offer her their help. Therefore, there should be more information available as well as more general discussions about stalking in the future, and also some guidelines for the public about how to deal with stalking and support the victims suffering from it. If the public does not understand the nature of stalking and the negative effects it can cause for its victims, it is likely that the stalking cases will not be recognized as a notable social problem in our community and they will continue being dealt in an inappropriate manner (Lambert et al., 2013).

In earlier studies, the possibility to participate in a peer support group has been appreciated and it has been claimed to have many advantages (Fox, 2011; Griffiths et al., 2015). Furthermore, the participants of our study mentioned that the peer support group was a significant factor in their recovery process. It was important for the victims to see that there are others out there who have gone through a similar ordeal. It should, however, be noted that earlier studies have found also some disadvantages concerning peer support: some people have reported feeling sorry, sad or worried about other participants when reading about their problems (Griffiths et al., 2015). The participants in this study expressed these kinds of feelings as well – but even though it was sometimes burdening to read about others' hard life situations, the peer support was still experienced as meaningful.

This suggests that it would be important to arrange these kinds of peer groups in the future and actively offer victims of stalking a chance to participate in them. It should be remembered that victims of stalking might fear the stalker so much that they do not have the courage to discuss their experiences with strangers face to face. Arranging the peer group on the internet appears to be a good option, because it allows victims to participate in the conversation anonymously. This probably increases the possibility that victims feel safe enough to participate in the group.

### **4.3. Strengths, weaknesses and future research**

We used content analysis as our research method, which made it possible for us to see what kinds of themes stood out from the data most clearly (Krippendorff, 2013). Because the data was based on the victims' spontaneous narration, we were able to find the most evident experiences the victims of stalking had been through, without restricting their topics. Due to the fact, that the researchers' own interpretations of the data always affect the research (Williams, 2007), we aimed to increase the reliability of our study by creating mutual classification regulations and with an open, continuing dialogue about the data. Our own attitudes and subjective notions were taken into account when dealing with the data. There were two of us coding the comments, which makes it more reliable to trust the final interpretations.

We made the reporting as clear, open, detailed and justifiable as possible, which is the basis of qualitative research (Williams, 2007). In line with these, we chose some extracts of the victims' statements to our study to demonstrate their experiences and how they fit into our categories. During the research process, we received continuous feedback from our research peers, who helped us improve our study by increasing its transparency and to see it from another perspective. These are significant factors when considering the reliability of our study.

Although we think that the victims' spontaneous narration was valuable in sorting out their most meaningful experiences, there is the possibility that something important was left unsaid because it was not one of the topics discussed. Furthermore, when victims were discussing, for example, the coping skills they had found useful, some of the victims might not have shared something, because it had already been talked about extensively by the other participants during the conversation. If the victims had been given controlled questions, there might have been more mentions about the discussed topic which to place in the categories.

As for the experiences with the authorities, it was not always necessarily clear what the victim meant by her comment, which made it more difficult for us to categorize it. When it comes to coping mechanisms, it was sometimes difficult to say whether the method used was helpful or whether it was simply mentioned by the victim because she had tried it. This leads

to the troubling fact that there is no unambiguous way to interpret the data (Peshkin, 2000), yet we think we managed to figure it out in the end. We did not have similar difficulties when classifying the main categories, which we consider to be more crucial with regard to our research.

The strong sympathy felt towards the victims of stalking had to be kept in mind when interpreting their experiences with the actions taken by the authorities. We were aware of our possible willingness to defend the victims and to find faults in the authorities. However, we also came across positive remarks regarding the view that all kinds of experiences were noted and categorized. As is typical with content analysis, we also had disagreements when coding the data, which shows our unique ways to thinking and interpreting things (Peshkin, 2000). By talking things through together we ended up with a classification we were both satisfied with.

What is interesting is that we were not able to analyze the comments of two participants because they were cut out from the data before we got it in our hands. One of the victims could not be contacted, which could be explained by her having found shelter for herself and her children so that she could not be found. The other victim was contacted but she did not want to participate in the study. It is likely that she was too scared to participate because of her past regardless of the study being anonymous. There were also four further victims who signed up for the group but never actually logged in to the conversation area. Two other participants logged in, but both of them only wrote one short comment in the area.

We were left with six active participants. They made some remarks about the inactive participants who did not actually take part in the discussions. The active ones shared several private and meaningful experiences about their stalking and they might consequently have expected also everyone else to share their stories. The inactive victims can still be assumed to have wanted to participate because they joined the group in the first place. It is possible that they were so busy and stressed with handling their ordeal that they did not have the energy to contribute to the conversations. It would have required a lot of strength to be able to discuss the horrible experiences and face them again. In the future, it might be important to find out reasons for why initially express their interest in the peer group but eventually back out of the conversations. These people might turn out to be the ones who need help the most.

One woman clearly participated in the group conversations more actively than the others. She wrote extensive comments in different conversation areas and described her experiences, thoughts and feelings in detail. Her comments fit almost every subcategory we created to answer our research questions, which tells about her active role in the group and her diverse stalking experiences. She emphasized certain themes many times in her texts, which is why these topics stood out clearly from the data. These opinions did not, however, always represent the shared view of the participants but only her own. It could be seen that this participant had a pressing need to share her experiences with other people and she also seemed to benefit a lot from the peer group.

Our study consisted of a rather small sample due to some of the victims not participating. This affects the possibility to generalize our results. It should be noted that the aim was not to generalize but rather to gain a deeper understanding of stalking and the phenomena around it, which is the main point when doing qualitative research (Tavallaei & Abu Talib, 2010). Because of the sensitivity of the topic, it was vital to secure the victims' anonymity over the course of our research. We had to eliminate certain risks by, for example, making changes in some of the text samples, so that the victims could not be recognized from the information they offered in their comments.

As it has emerged, stalking is not a new phenomenon, yet it was not criminalized in Finland until 2014. It has gradually gained popularity as a field of study but there is a gap in the literature concerning for example coping skills adopted by a victim during the stalking (Amar & Alexy, 2010). Only a few studies have looked at this about the topic in Finland. Our study is based on the peer support group data from the experiences of the victims of partner stalking and it is, to the best of our knowledge, the first piece of research done on this topic in Finland and apparently also internationally. What is special about our study is that we primarily focus on constructive coping mechanisms that victims actually find helpful, while most of previous research seems to focus on coping mechanisms overall or even only the attempts to manage in the present stalking. Most studies have studied stalking as it was taking place whereas this study analyzes revealed the useful mechanisms in a long-run recovery process as well as how the victims started to rebuild their lives after the stalking.

The results of our study could potentially be useful for making the work with the authorities more efficient: improving their knowledge about the stalking and how to support the victim,

teaching them to recognize the phenomenon and to develop clear procedures when dealing with it. This information can be considered when reflecting on desirable ways to support the victims in their coping process and helping them to rebuild their life following the traumatic stalking experiences. It is also important to develop the professional help that is intended for stalkers in order to affect their behavior, because the legislative and social means have turned out to be insufficient (Nikupeteri, 2016).

Because stalking is a very diverse phenomenon with different forms and manifestations (Häkkinen et al., 2003; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007), there is a crucial need for further research. We need more information about how to recognize and prevent stalking and whether it is possible to identify risk factors that lead to stalking. It is also important to find more effective ways to support the victims of stalking and to guarantee the best possible support for them. Children's agency in the stalking situation and the harms caused to them should be figured out when protecting the families (Nikupeteri, 2016) and the threat concerning possibilities that the developing technology offers for the stalker should carefully be paid attention.

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## APPENDIX

### Extract 1

*”Olen niin lytätty viranomaistaholla, että sisäinen ääneni väheksyy kokemuksiani. Jos olen puhunut niistä kokemuksista mitä meillä on ollut, niin kaikkea on aina yritetty normalisoida tai sitten olen ollut ärsyttävä exä, joka kertoo ikäviä juttuja ja puhuu jopa vainosta. (...). Niinpä meidät yritettiin laittaa riitelevän pariskunnan kategoriaan, mikä kyllä oli omituista.”*

### Extract 2

*”Ihmettelen miten viranomaiset eivät näe kuka manipuloi.”*

### Extract 3

*”Aiemmat kokemukset olivat siis sitä, että minut leimattiin lastensuojelun, terveydenhuollon yms. taholla hulluksi/sairaaksi, kostonhaluiseksi, lasta väkivalloin kohtelevaksi, katkeraksi naiseksi.”*

### Extract 4

*”Sielläkin exäni sai työntekijät ylistämään häntä, vaikka hän löi nuorinta lastani siellä. Asia siloiteltiin, eikä edes lastensuojeluilmoitusta tehty, koska exäni oli ollut niin katuva.”*

### Extract 5

*”Lastensuojelu oli hetken läsnä pahoinpitelyn takia mutta totesivat etten tarvitse heidän apuaan. He saivat myös osakseen uhkailua ja raivoa ja tämän jälkeen eivät ole olleet halukkaita auttamaan.”*

### Extract 6

*”Tajuan olevani aivan todella väsynyt tähän jatkuvaan uhkaan ja siihen, että minut äitinä jätetään yksin tekemään näin vaikeita ratkaisuja, ilman että voin olla varma miten viranomaiset toimivat lopulta!”*

### Extract 7

*”Tuntuu että toimin kuin robotti kun lastensuojelu puuttui meidän asioihin.”*

### Extract 8

*”Tänään taas etsin tahoja, jotka osaisivat neuvoa. On yllättävää, että kun väkivalta koskee lapsia, niin auttavia tahoja ei olekaan olemassa. Ei ole mitään järjestöä, jolla olisi asiantuntemusta juuri lapsiasioissa.”*

### Extract 9

*”Viranomaisten toiminta on tehnyt sitten toisen traumatisoitumisen, jonka seurauksena on vaikeaa enää luottaa keneenkään, mutta se on sitten jo toinen tarina.”*

*Extract 10*

*”Poliisista ei kuulu mitään, milloin tutkinta aloitetaan, tai että aloitetaanko sitä edes. Lastensuojelu ei kuulemma voi tehdä mitään, ennen kuin poliisi on ottanut kantaa, miten aikoo toimia. Ja jos poliisi ei ota kantaa ensi viikon torstaihin mennessä, niin silloin minä joudun päättämään miten toimin lasten tapaamisen suhteen.”*

*Extract 11*

*”Minulla on surkea kokemus huoltoon liittyvästä oikeudenkäynnistä. Asianajajani ei hoitanut asiaa niin kuin olisin kuulunut ja lopputulema oli että tuomari oli sitä mieltä että yhteishuolto pysyy. En saanut mahdollisuutta näyttää todisteita mitä minulla jo oli koska tämä minun asianajajani ryssi homman täysin.”*

*Extract 12*

*”Kumma juttu, että hän saa vapaasti syyttää minua eri asioista ilman kunnan näyttöä tai todisteita ja itse joudun keräämään monenlaisia todisteita sanojeni tueksi.”*

*Extract 13*

*”Oikeudessa sai kuulla itsestään vaikka millaista mustamaalausta ja ihan selkeitä valheita. Kauheinta oli että oikeudessa et pysty puolustamaan itseään vaan käsittely menee tietyssä kaaressa ja jos unohdat sanoa jotain on se jo ohi.”*

*Extract 14*

*”Ainoa mitä entinen mies tekee tällä hetkellä on se, että hän haastaa minua jatkuvasti oikeuteen lasten asioissa. Se on tavallaan laillista häirintää ja vainoamista. Olen ollut aika vihainen siitä, että oikeuslaitos on täysin kädetön suojaamaan tällaista turhaa haastamista.”*

*Extract 15*

*”Tämän jälkeen, kaivatuin sana oli ehkä työterveydenhoitajaltani, kun hän sanoi, että ihailee minua; olen ollut vahva ja rohkea. Ihailee minua siksi, että uskalsin tehdä asialle jotain, enkä jäänyt siihen tilanteeseen enää.”*

*Extract 16*

*”Tiedän tunteen kun uskottelee itselleen ettei ehkä tässä mitään pahaa enää voikkaan tapahtua ja se hetki kun itse tajuaa että tilanne onkin todella vakava. Minulla Asian tajuamiseen vaadittiin viranomaisten neuvoja ja puuttumista.”*

*Extract 17*

*”(...) minulla on aivan ihana lääkäri, joka ymmärtää tilanteeni ja on ohjannut minut terapiaan, jossa nyt käynkin.”*

*Extract 18*

*”Täällä uudella paikkakunnalla olen vihdoinkin saanut sen tuen ja avun, jollaista meidän olisi pitänyt kokea aiemminkin. Asiat loksahdelevat paikoilleen ja viranomaiset toimivat, niin kuin heidän kuuluukin toimia.”*

Extract 19

*”Toisaalta pelkään niin paljon, että minua ei uskota, että käyttäydyn itsekin siten, kuin valehtelisin, vaikka puhunkin totta.”*

Extract 20

*”Esikoisellani on pari kertaa ollut silmä mustana tullessaan kotiin isänsä luota. Olen lääkärissä käyttänyt ja tehnyt ilmoituksen sosiaalihuollolle, mutta helposti he voivat ajatella, että tämä on eron jälkeistä kiusantekoa.”*

Extract 21

*”Minulla on tällä hetkellä luottavainen olo viranomaisten suhteen. Olen jo heti erottuamme kysynyt esim. poliisilta neuvoa mitä tehdä. Nyt kun kasassa on tuhansia viestejä joissa lukuisia uhkauksia niin kaikki viranomaiset pyrkivät suojaamaan meitä ettei perhesurmaa tapahtuisi.”*

Extract 22

*”Vihan tunne on tullut tutuksi, sen tunnistaminen on ollut suhteellisen helppoa, mutta salliminen vaikeaa. Kun annoin itselleni luvan sallia vihan tunnetta; se tuli ensin itkuna. Sen jälkeen tuli ”raivopuuska”, jolloin kotini oli pakko siivota puhtaaksi. Kaikki tavarat ja vaatteet, jotka muistuttivat menneestä ja hänestä saivat lähteä. (...) Olen itsekin sisuuntunut vihantunteesta ja se on antanut uudenlaista energiaa.”*

Extract 23

*”Kuoleman hyväksyminen osaksi elämää auttaa myös. En ole ollenkaan varma selviämmekö hengissä tulevista koettelemuksista. Silti yritän elää tätä hetkeä niin hyvin kuin mahdollista.”*

Extract 24

*”Minua auttoi kovasti ymmärtää tätä toimintaa. Tavallaan sain luvan surea epäonnistunutta suhdetta. Ja pystyin samalla hyväksymään sen, että ehkä koko ihminen ei ollutkaan paha, vaan hänen kaltoinkohdeltu puolensa.”*

Extract 25

*”Minulla kesti kauan ymmärtää, että tapahtunut asia ovat olleet osa vainoa. En olekaan hullu, tästä huomaa kuinka törkeää henkinen väkivalta on ollut; kun olen alkanut uskoa hänen sanoihinsa.”*

Extract 26

*”(...) olen myös huomannut itseni kohdalla tuota liiallista kiltteyttä ja olenkin nyt harjoittanut enemmän omaa puolta pitämistä. Esim. lasten huoltajuudesta riidellessä, pidin puoleni ja kieltäydyin tietyistä asioista (esim. tapaamiset joka vkl; minullakin on oikeus viettää viikonloppuja lasten kanssa) ja toin oman mielipiteeni paremmin esille.”*

Extract 27

*”Olen myös hokenut itselleni, että jos joku on selvinnyt keskistysleiristä, niin minä voin selvitä tästä.”*

Extract 28

*“Toki huomaan myös, että mieleni tekee jo mieletöntä suojaa, koska ulkoisesti olen aivan kuin mitään ei olisikaan. Puhun, mutta en tunne mitään... Sekin on pelottavaa, koska se ei ole normaalia. Jos tuntisin, en kestäisi tätä!”*

Extract 29

*“Eli olen aina parhaani tehnyt ja yrittänyt. Sen vuoksi yritän hyväksyä elämän rajallisuuden sekä itseni vajavaisuuden ja olla sitä kautta armollinen itselleni.”*

Extract 30

*“Kaikki varmaan lähtee siitä, että pystyy antamaan itselleen anteeksi ja ehkä se vaikein, että pystyy antamaan sille toiselle, joka on vahingoittanut sinua, anteeksi.”*

Extract 31

*“Minulla oli monta vuotta valtava tarve jakaa tätä kokemusta. Puhuin suurinpiirtein kenelle tahansa, joka kuunteli. Nyt kun olen päässyt siitä, niin on melkein noloa, että olen niin paljon puhunut asioistamme. Silti uskon, että jos en olisi jakanut taakkaa, niin en olisi selviytynyt.”*

Extract 32

*”Ihana ja toisaalta todella kauheaa kuulla ettei ole yksin näiden tuntojen ja ajatusten kanssa. Se on kummallista miten paljon jo tällä että te muutamat olette jakaneet kokemuksianne on voimaannuttava vaikutus.”*

Extract 33

*“Olen käynyt itse psykoterapiassa kolmen vuoden ajan, mikä on ollut pelastus. Olen voimistunut ja vahvistunut ja saanut käsiteltyä lapsuudenkin vaikeita kokemuksia. Olen myös päässyt eroon syyllisyydestä jota tunsin siitä että olin ajautunut väkivaltaiseen suhteeseen.”*

Extract 34

*”Kiitos vahtimestarit armollisuudesta, ymmärtämisestä ja monen asian sanoittamisesta! (...) Mutta onneksi vahtimestarit ovat viisaina naisina olleet sitäkin antoisampia meille! Henkilökohtaisesti vielä kiitän siitä tuesta, mitä sain elämäntilanteemme taas kriisiytyessä!”*

Extract 35

*“Omat vanhempani ja siskoni ovat olleet aivan mahtava tuki ja olen erittäin kiitollinen, että minulla on heidät sekä ystäviä, jotka ovat jaksaneet tukea ja ymmärtää.”*

Extract 36

*“Varasin meille eilen toisen vahtikoiran. Minulla on jo vanha saksanpaimenkoira, joka on myös vartioiva ja suojeleva koira. Paimenkoira kulkee meidän mukana ja nukkuu sisällä. Tämä uusi koira taas on ulkokoira, joka ei päästä ketään reviirilleen. Uskon, että tällä yhdistelmällä tulemme*



*jatkossa pystymään asua täällä. Molemmat ovat isoja rotuja ja osaavat jo puoli vuotiaana olla riittävän vakuuttavia, että saamme niistä turvaa.”*

*Extract 37*

*“Nyt on koti rauhoitettu. Ei ole tietokonetta, tablettia, modeemia tai reitintintä. Televisioon olen laittanut eston päälle ja puhelimen vaihdoin uuteen ja numeron vaihdoin uuteen. Puhelimesta otin sijainti-palvelun pois päältä.”*

*Extract 38*

*”Parasta turvakodissa on ollut nähdä lasten levollinen ja turvallinen olo. Kuitenkin pienet ja isommat aistii miten äiti voi ja reagoivat siihen.”*

*Extract 39*

*”Paikkakunnan vaihdos on ollut meille siunaus. Ensimmäistä kertaa elimme vapaana exästäni, joka ei halunnut tavata lapsiaan, koska haastoi minut oikeuteen, yrittäen saada itselleen lasten asumisen. Lapset alkoivat toipua ja näin ensimmäistä kertaa elämäni aikana onnelliset ja vapaat lapset.”*

*Extract 40*

*“Sovimme tyttärenti kanssa, että hän kutsuu puhelimesta minua ystävänsä nimellä, jolloin minä soitan hätäkeskukseen.”*

*Extract 41*

*”Silti minun on ollut pakko elää myös normaalia elämää, koska sen ansioista olen pysynyt järjissäni.”*

*Extract 42*

*”Meilläkin uuden arjen opettelu lähti vähän kerrallaan. Ensin herättiin ajoissa, puettiin ja koitettiin muistaa harjata hiukset, kun se alkoi olla hallussa, otettiin mukaan hammaspesut ja vitamiinit. Otettiin arkea helpottavat asiat, vaatteiden valitseminen illalla (tytöllä on aina aamuisin vaatekriisi; eikä illalla valittu asukokonaisuus olekaan enää kiva aamulla), ruokien teko valmiiksi jääkaappiin, oma aika; vaikka vain 5min, aamuisin.”*

*Extract 43*

*“Löysin onnen itsestäni ja olen myös lähtenyt toteuttamaan haaveita joita en ole ennen uskaltanut. Tajusin ajautuneeni väärälle alallekin ja eron jälkeen olen laittanut koko elämäni remonttiin tavallaan. Opiskelen sairaanhoitajaksi (erikoistun mieleterveyshoitotyöhön) ja on ollut aivan ihana tajuta olevansa vihdoin oikeassa paikassa.”*

*Extract 44*

*“Iloa saan myös harrastuksistani, juoksusta, tanssista ja kiipeilystä. Harrastan sillä asenteella, että pidän itsestäni huolta lasteni ohella ja voin paremmin.”*

*Extract 45*

*“Lasten vuoksi on ollut pakko ottaa itsestä kaikki se viisaus irti, mitä minussa on, että olen voinut selviytyä. (...) Pysin olemaan vain paras äiti lapsilleni. Ja yritän kerätä voimia siihen, koska lapseni ovat sen verran rikki, että minua tarvitaan vielä moneen. ”*

*Extract 46*

*“Toivon, että jonain päivänä asiat muuttuvat paremmiksi. Tässä asiassa toivon ja uskon, vaikka se nyt tuntuu mahdottomalta ja ikuisuuden kestävältä. Ehkä niin ei tapahdu koskaan, mutta toivon parempaa.”*

*Extract 47*

*“Ehkä matkaa on vielä edessä mutta uskon että kaikki kääntyy vielä hyväksi.”*