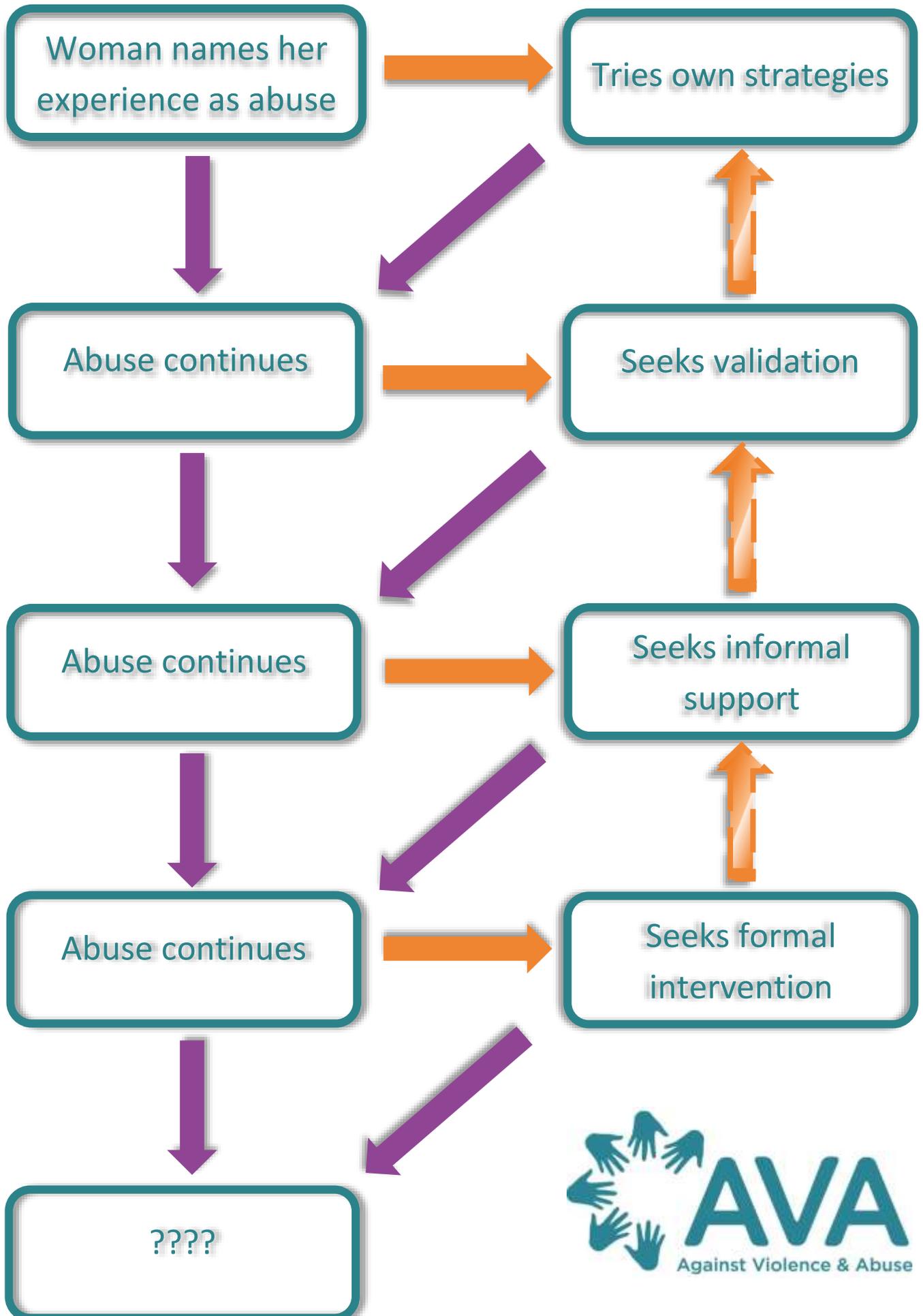


# The process of help seeking



## Help seeking model narrative

It is vital to understand that the journey a woman experiencing abuse is on is a complex and hugely personal one that does not fit neatly with models of social care and support. In recognition of this, AVA, working with survivors of domestic violence and abuse, and other experts in the field, has developed this model of help-seeking strategies.

The model identifies specific stages in the help-seeking process, but also recognises that women move forward, back and around between stages depending on their experiences during the process.

The stages can be summarised as:

### **Stage 1: the woman names abuse as a problem**

The stage that comes before a woman seeks help. For some women, it can take years to recognise that what they are experiencing is abuse. The frequency, severity and context of the abuse are all major factors in affecting how long this takes.

### **Stage 2: the woman tries own strategies**

The first response of most women to abuse is to try and sort it out themselves, within the privacy of the relationship. Strategies at this stage may include:

- Trying to talk to her partner about how his behaviour is affecting her.
- Avoiding the conversation or behaviour that seemed to precipitate the violence.
- Physical retaliation.
- Outlining the consequences if it ever happens again (for example, threatening to leave).

Passive acceptance of the abuse is rare. It is more usual for the woman to try a range of strategies to avoid or minimise abuse. These may include adopting the appearance of passive acceptance if standing up to her partner increases the abuse.

At this stage it is rare for the woman to seriously consider ending the relationship.

### **Stage 3: the woman seeks validation**

At this stage, a woman is beginning to exhaust her own strategies and needs to tell someone. The most likely candidates are a best friend, mother or a sister. What she is looking for is validation of her definition of her experiences as abusive, without having control taken away from her. She is seeking reassurance that the abuse is real and serious and may be looking for suggestions and advice – she is not looking to be told what to do at this stage.

### **Stage 4: the woman seeks informal support**

The stage where women seek information about other choices and options that may be available to them. Advice from family and friends can be important in influencing where women look for help – and word-of-mouth reputation of services becomes really important now. At this stage, a woman may pick up leaflets, take a note of phone numbers on posters, or call (often anonymously) for advice.

She may also start dropping hints about why she is seeking help or advice without being explicit, for example, telling her GP she is having trouble sleeping because she is always rowing with her partner.

Responses and interventions at this stage need to strike a careful balance between responding to her immediate concerns and assisting her to consider the wider context of her life so as to address the underlying issue of abuse.

This stage of seeking help is likely to be when she considers ending the relationship, although she may have doubts about this as an option.

### **Stage 5: the woman seeks formal intervention**

The stage that professionals would like all women to be at. However, many women need help in getting to this stage, and may also move back to an earlier stage if their experience of formal help seeking is negative.

Leaving is usually a serious option by this stage, although even here permanent separation may not be being considered. However, it is at this stage that the woman seeks specific and formal intervention from agencies.

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