

Elsa's Story: Endurance & Resilience

Background: Transition and Tumult

Elsa's story begins with her immigration to Canada seventeen years ago. An adventurous youth, at the age of twenty she decided to take the chance of moving to an unfamiliar country, to marry a man she barely knew, hoping that things would turn out. Soon after her arrival, having neither friends nor family to socialize and connect with, Elsa began to feel isolated and depressed. This pivotal life change for Elsa became much more than just entering adulthood and marriage, it also involved grappling with feelings of loss, confusion and loneliness, while struggling with a language and culture foreign to her;

"Basically I didn't have anyone to talk to or some kind of friend. Everyone appeared to be strange to me...when I was leaving I felt I was a carefree, independent teenager, and suddenly when I came here, I found myself in the company of adults...It really had an impact on me that I didn't have any relationships with anyone."

One year after arriving in Canada, Elsa's first child was born. This intensified her sense of isolation and she felt more and more overwhelmed and powerless by the responsibility of raising a child without help or support. Although Elsa and her husband were starting to get to know one another by this point, things began to turn sour between them as Elsa's feelings of helplessness turned into aggressive behaviour toward him.

"So I started to become more and more nervous and aggressive. I had to get it out somehow, so I would pick on my husband for no reason, because it would grow in me, the helplessness... I didn't have anyone to talk to, to go out, and get things out of my system, I basically needed that."

Loneliness, depression and exhaustion consumed Elsa for the first year after the birth, feelings that did not subside until she went to school to learn English and began working and socializing with women her own age. For the next few years, things became easier as Elsa and her husband began to feel more at ease in their partnership.

After the birth of a second child, Elsa's mother-in-law entered the picture, and the family life started to once again unravel as multiple problems arose. Conflict between Elsa and her mother-in-law was intense, resulting in Elsa's husband turning against her and justifying his ill behaviour towards her. Elsa suffered emotional and physical abuse at the hands of her mother-in-law as well as her husband, and was unaware that she could turn anywhere for help. A third child

came along quickly and Elsa found herself stressed and overwhelmed looking after three young children while struggling with such emotional turmoil:

"I would walk around constantly and cry. And I had no patience with the kids... They were hard times, because I didn't have a smile for my children. It's the worst. You don't have the strength. Maybe they would like to play with you and see you satisfied and happy with a smile on your face, and you are not like that. Sometimes you yell at them or tell them to leave because you don't have the strength because your head is buzzing. You don't know what to do with yourself. You feel your world has fallen apart and you only think about your problem."

Accessing Services

Ten years went by of struggling through a tumultuous relationship with her husband. Arguments would often escalate into vicious tirades of insults and violence, particularly when Elsa's husband was drinking. The three children were often exposed to conflict between the parents, and behavioural problems were beginning to surface. Neighbours started calling the police, and eventually Family and Children's Services (FACS) became involved. At this time, counselling services were provided for Elsa and her husband, and her husband's drinking was identified as a problem. After being assessed through FACS, Elsa and her children were enrolled in a program for mothers and children who are experiencing aggression and alcohol in the family, which appeared to help the children a great deal. Overall, Elsa was grateful at the time for the contact and intervention through FACS, as the counselling helped her change her life in a way that she was no longer suffering so intensely:

"The most helpful was that I changed my mentality, and I returned to the norm. I started to feel just as I should always feel. Not like someone who is small, and put down, but like a normal human being. And I also thought it was positive, the way they approached the children, and that I had the opportunity to attend such a program with them. Because I think that made us understand a lot. Even though they were young, I think they had it explained very well. I saw their reactions. They really enjoyed going there."

After a few years of interventions and police visits to the home, things began to calm between Elsa and her husband, and reconciliation in the family had taken place to the point where FACS was no longer involved. Although her husband was negative about attending the mandatory counselling sessions, Elsa felt that it was useful at the time and did help each of them understand one another's point of view in a different light.

With a return visit from the mother-in-law, things began to deteriorate once again. Conflicts arose, and arguments intensified. During a particularly frustrating dispute between Elsa and her husband, she struck him with the car brush she was using to scrape snow from the car. Sustaining a scratch on the nose and some bruising, the husband and mother-in-law went to the police and filed a complaint of physical assault. Elsa was arrested that evening and taken to jail for the night. Although released from jail the next day, she was barred from going near her home or having any direct communication with her husband or children until the case went to court (over a month later). Elsa stayed at the house of an acquaintance and found herself overcome with grief and dismay at the unexpected series of events. During this time, she received no help or support from FACS, which she recalls with infuriation:

"I didn't have a right to meet with my kids. I didn't have a right to be near my house...how can I not miss my children and wonder how they feel? How they are handling it, what they are thinking? But during that entire time, practically no one contacted me from FACS, not even once. So where are the values that the happy family is at the core? The mother, the children. Since, knowing our history, because this was not the first time they had contacted us."

Once the assault case was resolved and Elsa was allowed to return home, mandatory counselling resumed, along with a one-year period of probation. Shortly after Elsa's ordeal with police, her husband was arrested and charged with assault after a serious beating, and he also spent one month away from the home, followed by a one-year period of probation. Elsa's husband was sent for mandatory anger-management counselling for his anger and aggression, although Elsa feels that it was not particularly effective partly due to culturally-grounded resistance.

Once Elsa and her husband were both home and cooperating with one another as a family, reconciliation again took place and disputes remained minimal. Elsa continued with counselling for as long as she felt was necessary, and feels that the support helped her cope and get through the difficult times.

Maintaining Strength and Stability

With her eldest child now sixteen, Elsa finds her family life much easier to handle. Having benefited from years of counselling and support through social services, she has built up internal strength and independence, and has ascertained skills to be used when dealing with conflict and depression. Although she has on several occasions considered the possibility of separation, she feels that both she and her husband have learned and changed a great deal over the years, making their marriage much more composed and reasonable:

"Now I approach it on my own, calmly. I think it over. I don't give up, get depressed. Like before I would panic, get depressed, my world would fall apart. Now it lasts one or two days, but not a month for sure...I start a calm discussion with my husband, and we approach it differently...it's not that I walk around depressed, and I'm a nervous wreck for weeks, and my world fell apart, and nothing interests me any longer. I return to reality quickly."

Through the help they received through counselling, Elsa and her husband have learned to avoid arguing in front of the children, realising now the impact such behaviour has on them. Although conflict will inevitably emerge in a family with three growing children, problems are dealt with at a more rational level and Elsa feels much more able to cope with the responsibilities.

Assessing Mental Health Services

With several years of intervention to comment on, Elsa certainly feels that she benefited from the services provided, especially after the initial contact with FACS. Overall, she feels stronger, more independent and better able to cope with her marital problems in a rational way. Coming from Poland as a young and uninformed youth, Elsa wishes that she had been made aware of services much earlier, and feels that all immigrant women should be informed early on:

"I think that new immigrants should definitely be accessed so that these women who newly arrive...could be aware that there are such possibilities. That this help exists. It is not about breaking families up, but about helping out such women, so that both spouses could come to an understanding and try to fix the marriage together, change the behaviour. If it is taking you a few years before you find out anything at all it could be too late for certain changes."

Both the individual counselling she received, and the group programs were essential to Elsa and her children in terms of understanding their situation, learning to cope, and building independence and self-esteem. Integral to all of this though, was the opportunity to receive help from a Polish-speaking counsellor, which mitigated any language or cultural barriers;

"If I didn't have a psychologist, a support, that speaks Polish, then I would definitely not have decided to go and speak English to someone, since I wouldn't be able to get along. I can't express my emotions, my problems, it's impossible."

Although unhappy with the lack of response by FACS following Elsa's arrest and separation from her family, overall she is positive about the kind of intervention

that took place, and with the attempts to treat her family as a unit and provide appropriate care.