



**GHENT  
UNIVERSITY**

# “People always hurt you”



**A qualitative study of survivors’ dating and romantic  
relationship experiences following adult sexual violence**

Stockman, D., Van Parys, H., De Mol, J., Uzieblo, K., Littleton, H., Keygnaert, I., Lemmens, G., & Verhofstadt, L.

# IMPACT OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE ON INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

- **Most research on intra-individual impact** (Goff & Smith, 2005 )
- **Theoretical evidence for impact on intimate relationships** (Bradbury & Karney, 1995; Goff & Smith, 2005; Monson et al., 2010)

# EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE ON RELATIONSHIP MAINTENANCE AND INITIATION

## Quantitative

- Decreased relationship satisfaction (Vitek & Yeater, 2021)
- Mental health of survivor associated with decreased relationship satisfaction in partner (Georgia et al., 2018)
- Avoidance of relationships (Collibee & Furnam, 2014)

## Qualitative

- Partners' PTSD symptoms, frustrations, not knowing how to help the survivor (Smith, 2005)
- Communication difficulties (Connop & Petrak, 2004)
- Not feeling worthy (Brownstone et al., 2018)
- Distrust in potential partners (O'Callaghan et al., 2018)

# GAPS

## **Theory**

- Not tailored specifically for sexual violence
- Does not consider relationship initiation processes

## **Existing studies**

- Do not study relationship experiences of survivors in-depth
- No attention to broader context

# RESEARCH QUESTIONS

*“How do survivors experience previous, current and future intimate relationships following sexual violence”?*

*“How do survivors cope with these relationship experiences?”*

# METHOD

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# SAMPLING PROCEDURE

- Adaptive sampling in clinical and community settings
- Importance of agency (no rewards, self-identifying)
- >18 years old, ASV >16 years old

# SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

- 14 survivors
- 21-63 years
- All Caucasian
- 10 identified as female, 4 identified as male
- 7 single, 2 married, 5 in a relationship
- Time since ASV 2-26 years ago
- 12 multiple sexual victimizations, 3 ASV + CSA
- Index assault: 3 rape by dating/romantic partner, 1 attempted rape by ex-partner, 5 by acquaintance, 3 by stranger, 1 human trafficking, 1 sexual harassment by acquaintance

# INTERVIEW PROCESS

- Gaining insight in meaning-making of sexual violence and psychosocial impact of sexual violence
- Semi-structured: interview guide
- Agency

# INTERVIEW GUIDE

**Table 1. Interview guide**

<b>Introduction</b>	<p>How did you find the information on this study?</p> <p>What made you decide to participate in this study?</p> <p>Can you introduce yourself?</p>
<b>Impact questions</b>	<p>Would you be able to tell me – in as much detail as you like – how you have coped with the assault?</p> <p>Which changes have you experienced following the assault?</p> <p>Prompts: psychological changes, social changes, relational changes, work changes, study changes, sexual changes, other changes, ...</p>
<b>Reflexive questions</b>	<p>Who were you before the assault?</p> <p><i>Prompts: What was your outlook on life? How did you perceive yourself, the world, others? What were your ambitions?</i></p> <p>How has this changed since the assault?</p> <p>Which meaning does the assault have to you?</p> <p>Prompts: What do you think when you think back of assault? Which role does the assault play in your life? Has it always been like this?</p>
<b>Ending</b>	<p>What is the most important thing that should be remembered from this interview?</p>

# REFLEXIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS

1. Relistening and rereading interviews
2. Selecting unit of analysis (casual/sexual/intimate relationships)
3. Coding of interview
4. Constructing themes
5. Defining themes
6. Reviewing, refining and redefining themes
7. Writing manuscript

# QUALITY GUIDELINES

1. Reflexivity
2. Investigator triangulation: D. Stockman, E. Dhaenens, H. Van Parys, & J. De Mol
3. Reviewed by experts in couple and family research and therapy (G. Lemmens & L. Verhofstadt) and experts on the topic of sexual violence (K. Uzieblo, I. Keygnaert, H. Littleton)

# RESULTS

# OVERVIEW OF ALL THEMES

The meaning and impact of sexual violence is context-related

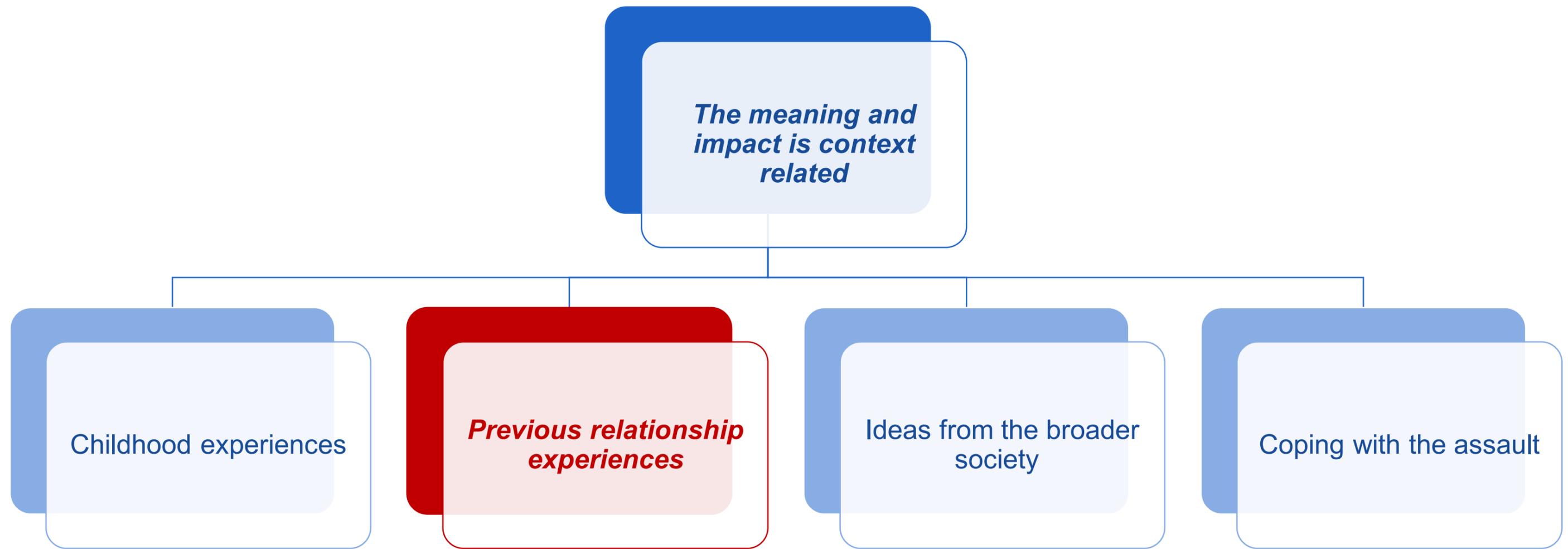
The decision to (temporarily) avoid intimate relationships

The experience of sexual violence plays a role in what one looks for in a relationship

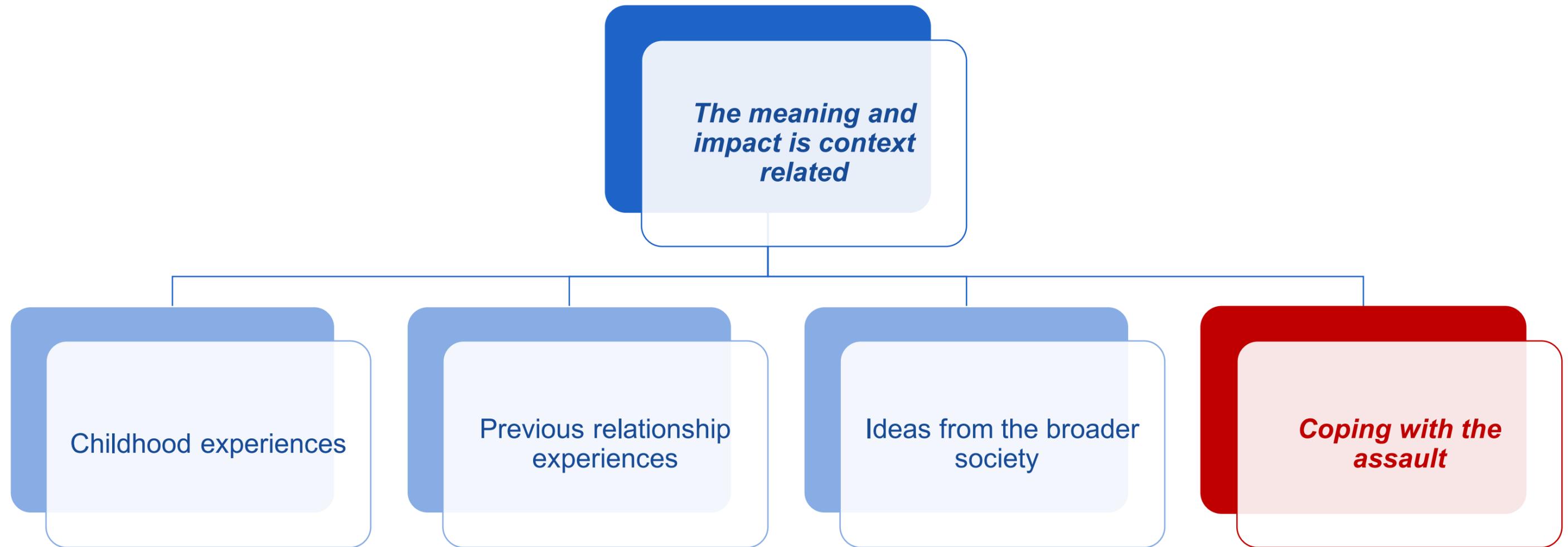
Sexual violence takes up space in a relationship

Healing effects of being in a relationship

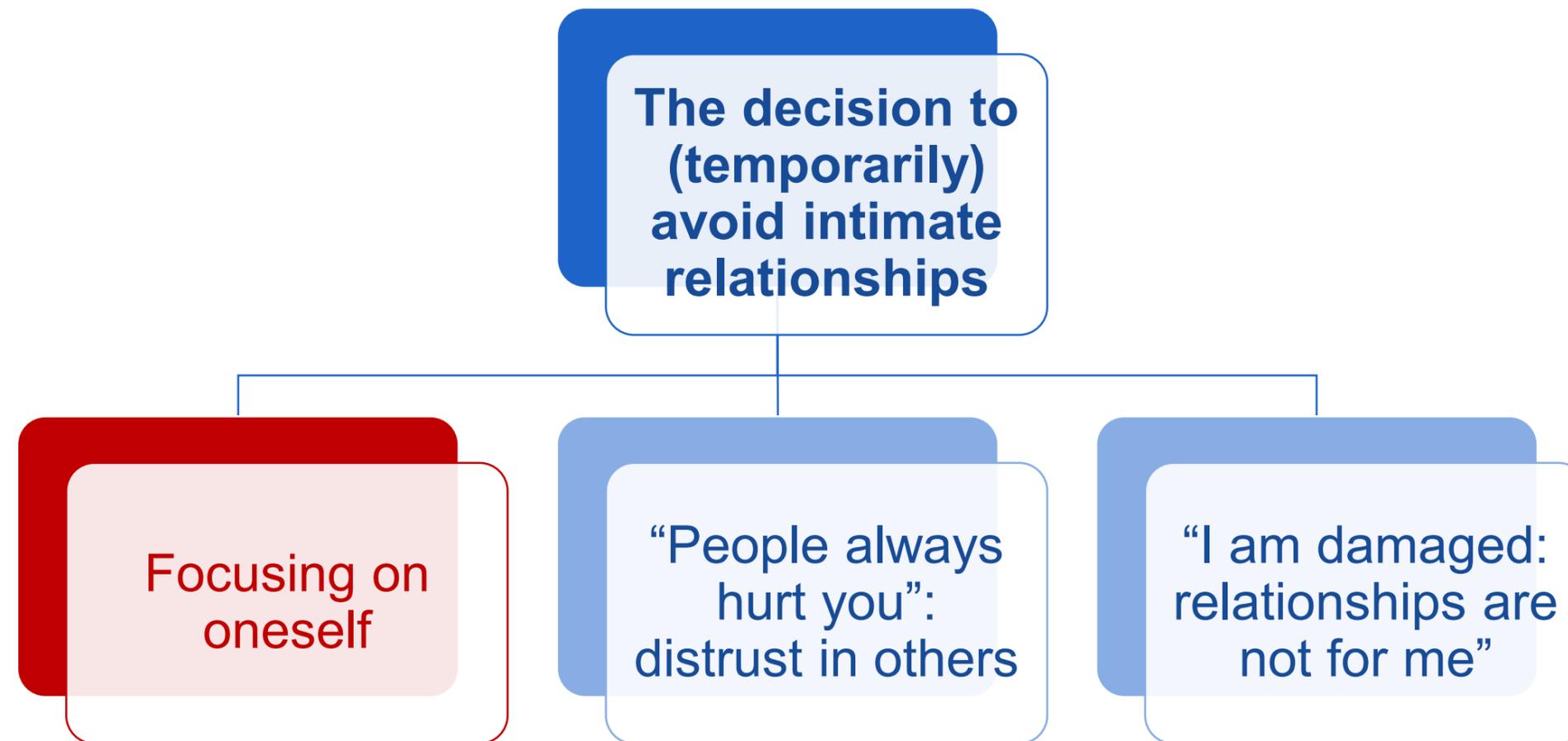
Coping with sexuality following the assault



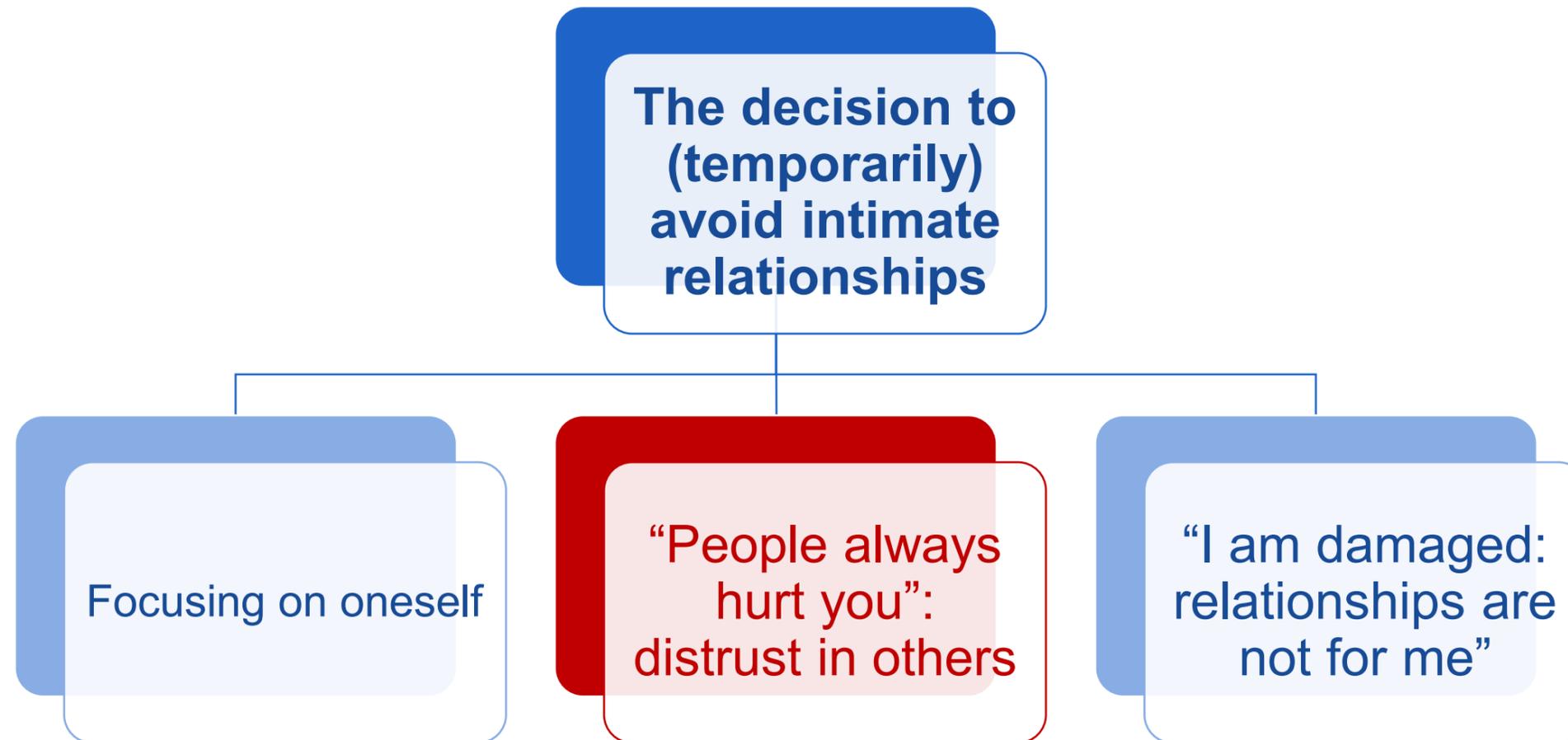
*Afterwards it became clear he also cheated on me. So now I cannot separate what exactly causes the issues I have in relationships. Is it due to distrust? I think it's mostly due to the distrust because of the cheating. (Joanne)*



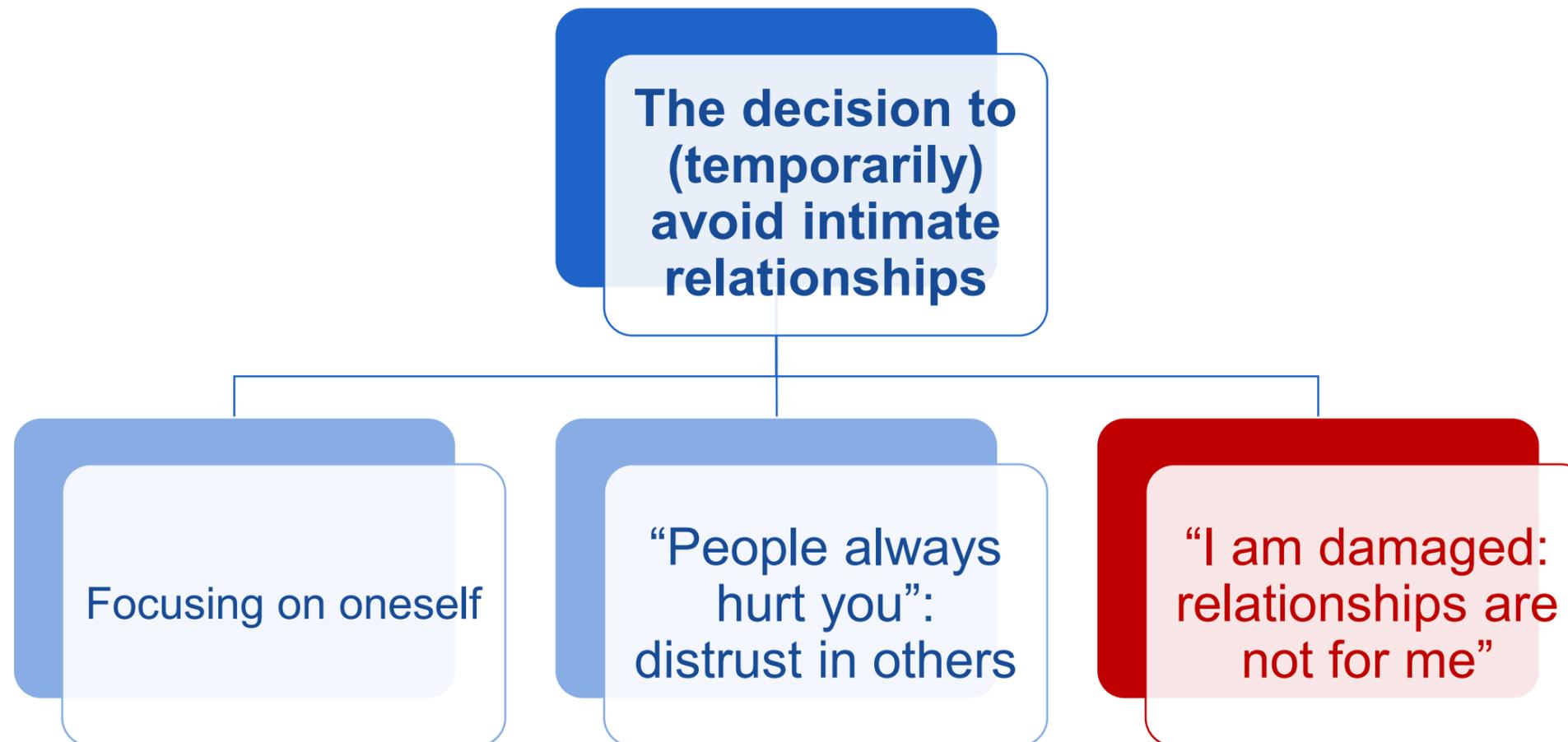
*I even contacted an online counselor through the chat to ask how I can prepare for this disclosure. They did not really help me but I had the opportunity to tell my story and then decide for myself what I wanted to do. (Mary)*



*So I had decided for myself – I even told my friend back then (laughs), that’s why I remember it – “Until the end of the year, no guys should try their luck with me. They should not even try to kiss me whatsoever. I just want to be by myself, I need a period for myself”. (Mary).*



*I don't like getting acquainted to new people. I avoid it at all costs. And, you know, when I do meet new people – in general, not only men – I am like 'I don't want to attach myself to someone, because people hurt you'. You don't feel like wanting to have pain, so you avoid it. So, I am kind of difficult in meeting new people while I am actually very social (Ella).*



*The things that have happened have lowered my self-esteem immensely. It confirmed that I am worthless. [...] Yes, also in relationships. If someone who seems very cool likes me than it seems too good to be true for me, you know. And even if that person sticks around and we get together, I destroy that relationship pretty quickly (Abby).*



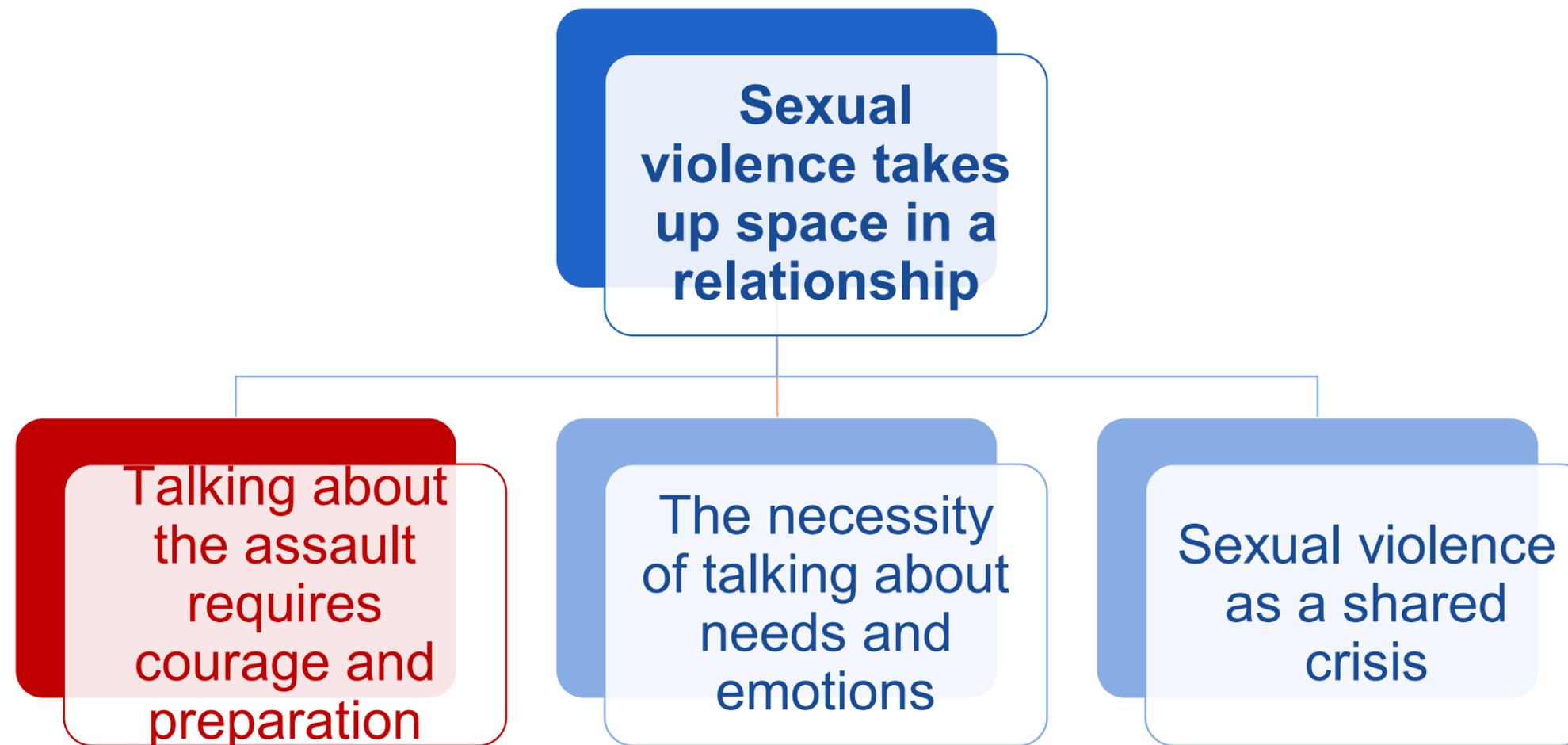
*I was in a kind of relationship back then because I felt so bad. I did not want to be alone, you know? But being in that relationship made it actually worse. I could not handle a relationship in that moment. [...] I felt so bad I thought “I don’t want to be alone” but sometimes it’s better to be alone than to throw yourself into a relationship. (Joyce)*



*I have had a relationship with someone which has ended. It became asexual at first and eventually became romantically difficult as well because she associated many things of my body with the sexual abuse she experienced as a child. If I compare my experiences as a 22-year old to those events, I know it's an extreme example, but it almost seems trivial. No, it's not trivial but it is at least a lot less severe and something where I think of a lot less and which influences my life in a lesser extent than her experiences (John).*

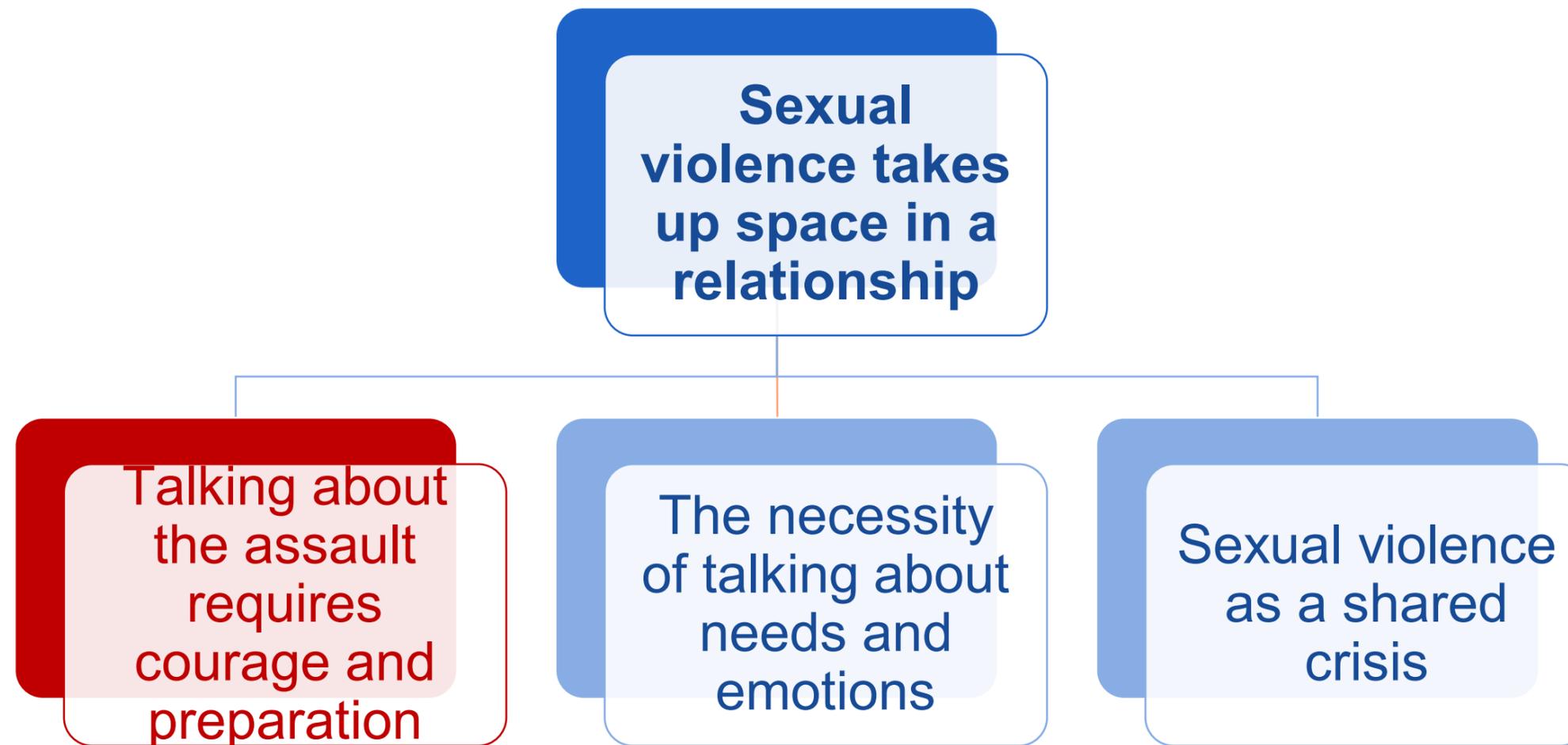


*I got acquainted with a guy with whom I really fell in love with. The reason I fell in love – I thought I was not able to ever fall in love again – is because that guy had autism. So, I felt very reassured he was not going to cheat on me or he was not going to, you know. He did not play dominant games because he just was not very present emotionally, you know? So, he does not think he has to take control over me. It's like: “Ok, I got used to you and I like having you around”. Sex was also not that important for him, you know (Ella).*



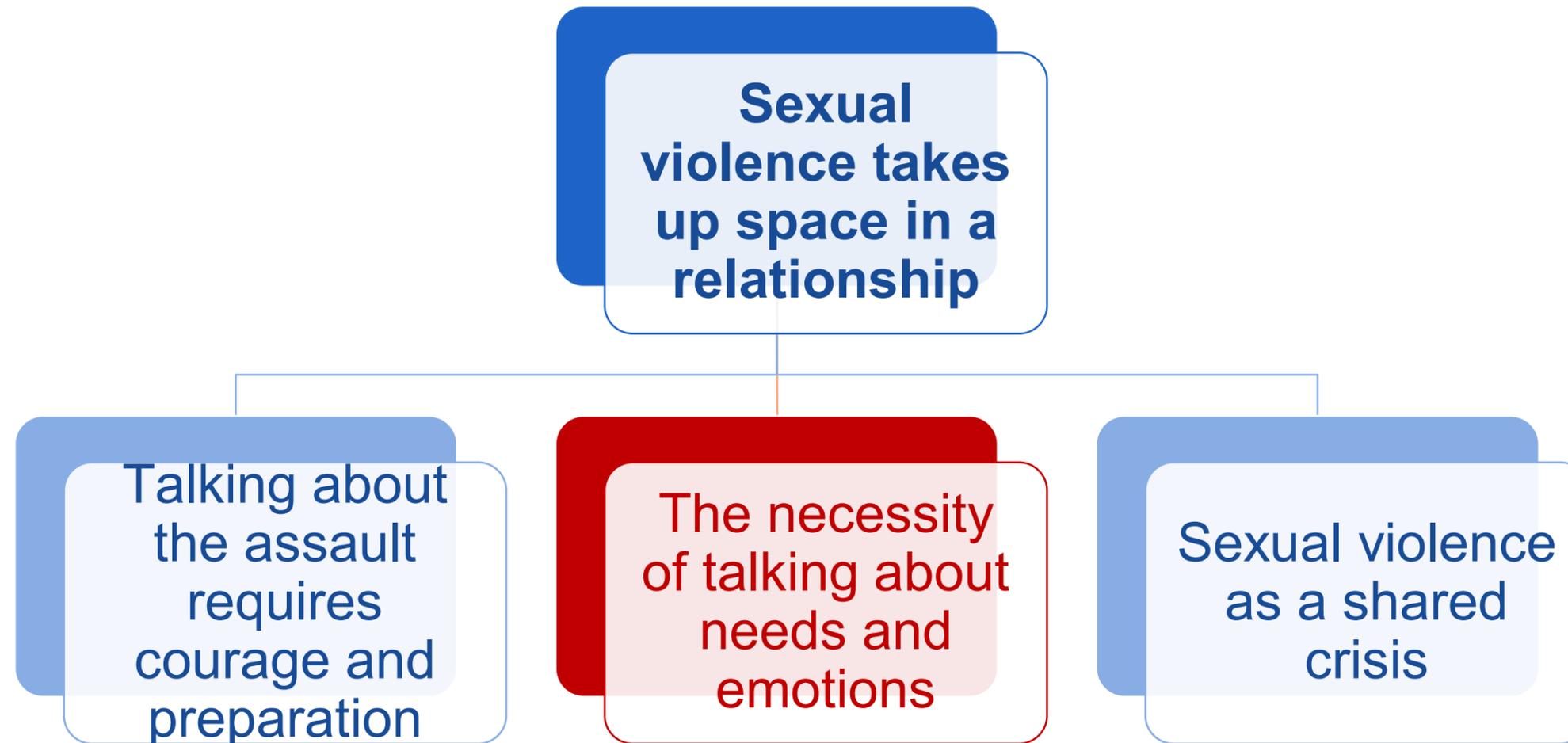
### ***The costs of silence***

*The problem is that I am one of those persons who has to talk about everything. Talking to my boyfriend was not an option because I still thought I had cheated on him. [...] it's very hard for me to say this, but I am the kind of person who – even when in a relationship – I push guys who try something away. So, what he said was logical. Until that [the assault] happened. Then I was in a crisis like 'look what I am capable of'...*



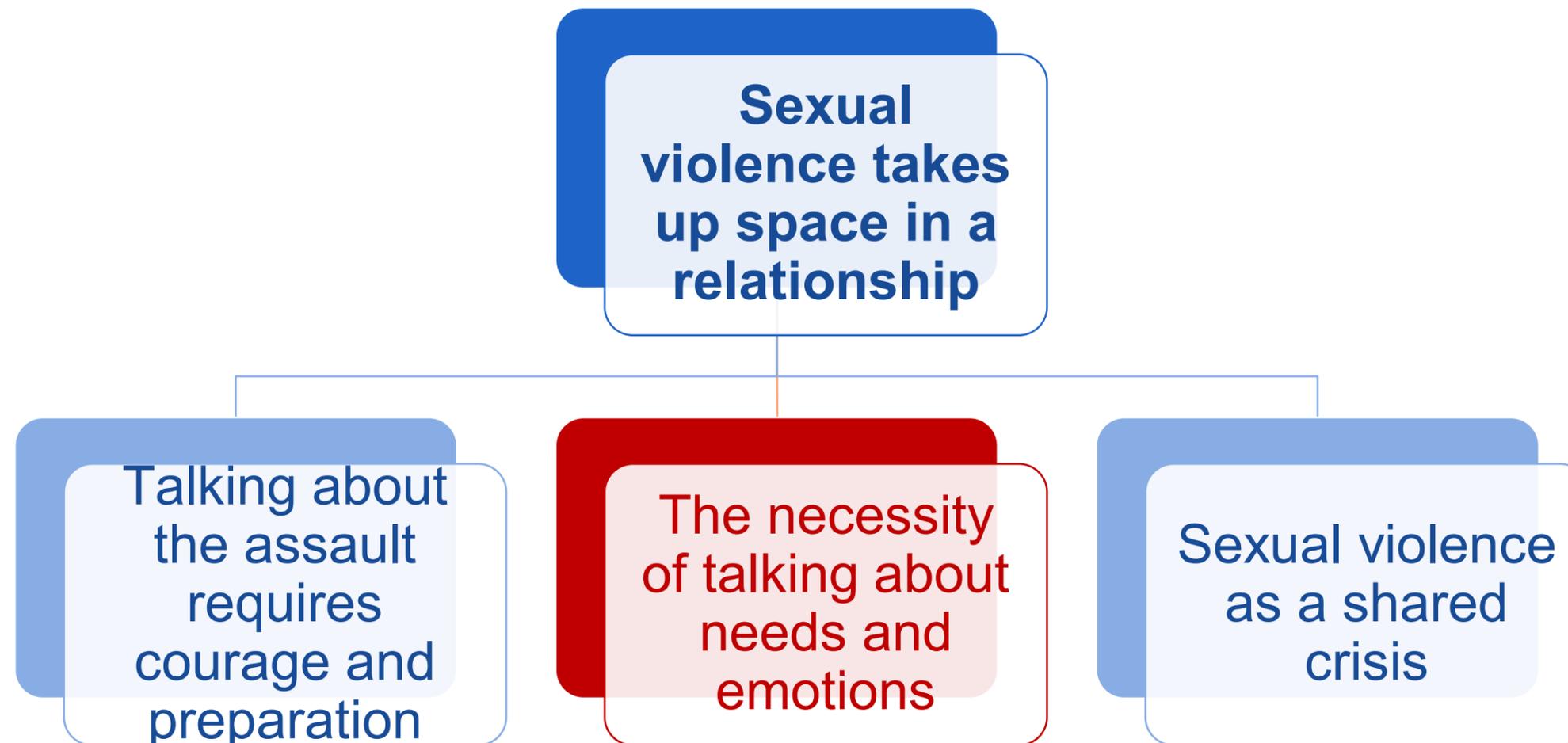
### ***The costs of silence***

*...I am someone who cannot handle secrets. I would even spoil presents because I cannot keep things for myself. This whole thing was eating me up inside. And now I still find it difficult. Recently I saw him again and somewhere in me I still feel like I am a liar or that I have not been completely honest. (Mary)*



***When the partner is supportive, speaking is gold***

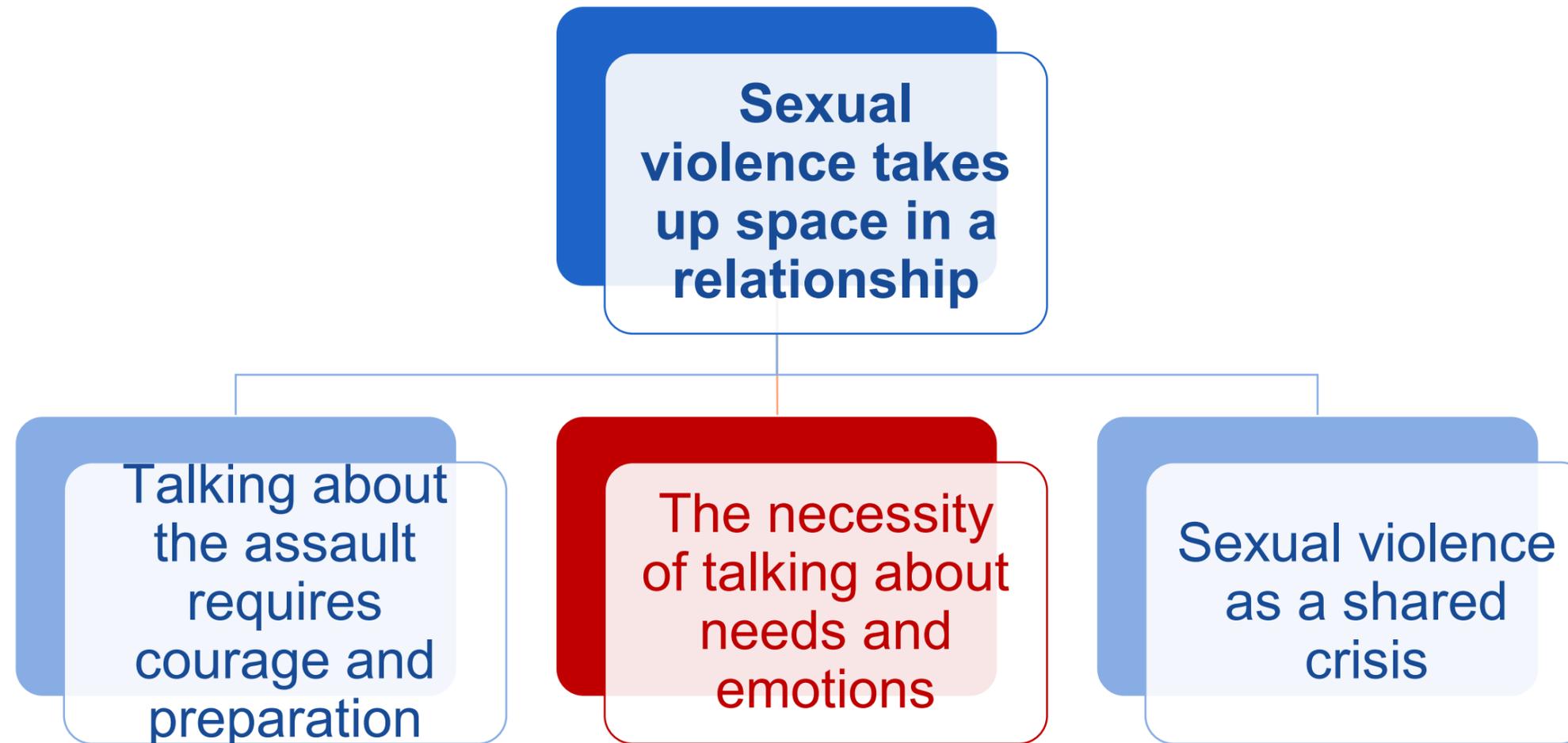
*From the moment I was able to talk again, I told my boyfriend what had happened. Then he became very angry because his opinion was that I should have said something immediately so we could say something to the guy who did that. Then we went on by foot and during our walk he remained very angry. (Joanne)*



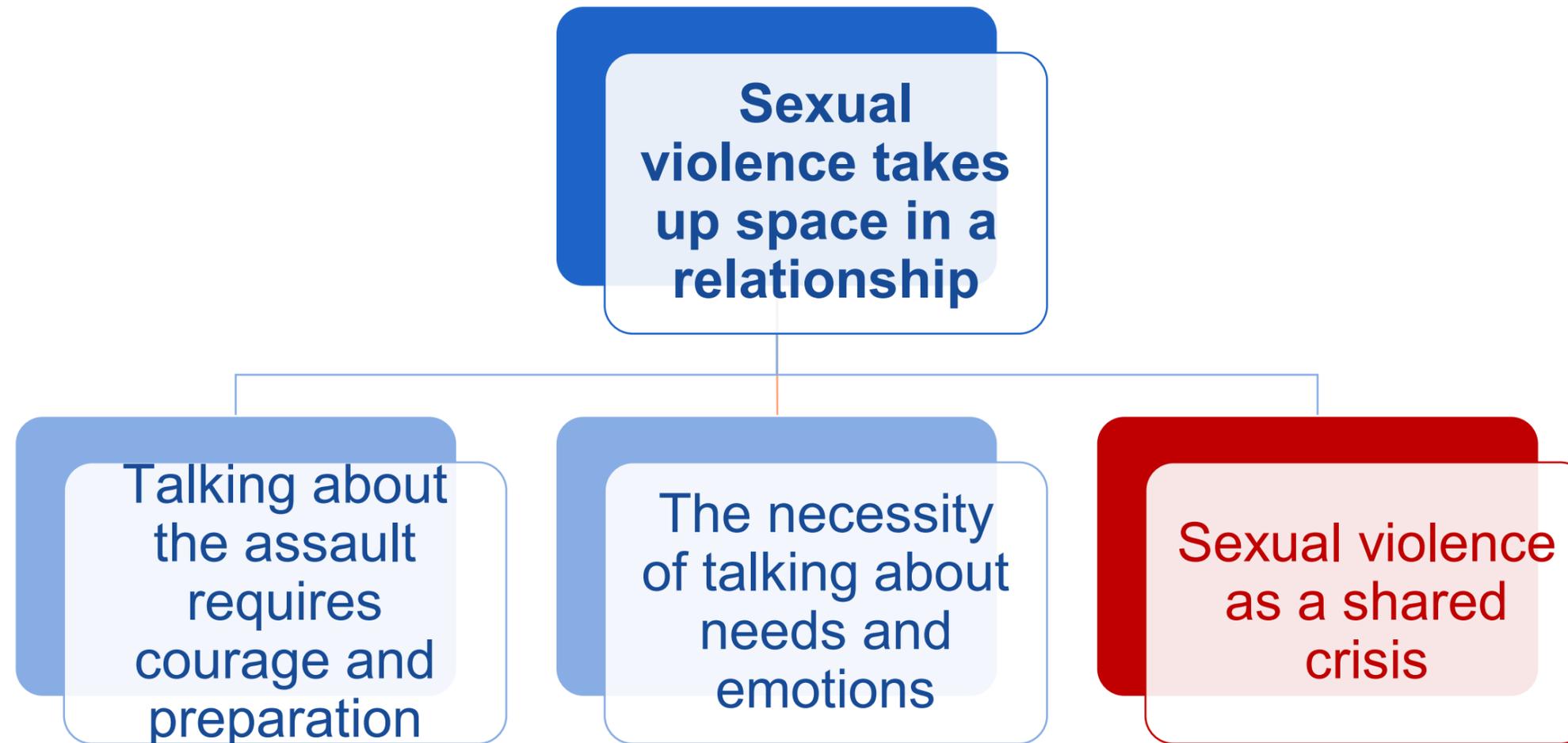
***When the partner is supportive, speaking is gold***

*He reacted much better than I could have imagined. [Cries] Sorry. I did not know what to expect. I had told him I had something important to say. [...] Even when I know it's bad what has happened, I still blame myself for my role in the situation. I feel disgusted with myself and I was so scared he would feel the same disgust about me. Instead, he held me before he had read the whole letter.*

*(Mary)*



*Even if I would have been with my ex then, I would have interacted with him differently. [...] If I would have done those four years [counseling training] earlier, we would have never been divorced. But I did not know how communication worked so yeah, it escalated. It was fire on fire. We could not talk anymore. So, it stopped there. (Audrey)*



*In the relationship with my ex-boyfriend right after the incident, I did that a lot. I constantly put him in dilemmas and I did not make it easy for him. Sometimes, for example, I asked for a lot of attention and the next thing he knows, I turn around and ignore him. Really, that kind of stuff (laughs). This is not okay. I think that is testing behavior. Like 'what can I do before he leaves me?'. Because I need to hear, feel to what extent I can trust him. (Sophie)*

## Healing effects of being in a relationship



*Shortly after that moment I had the luck of being together for a very long time with a good friend. That was a kind of safe space to, you know, whatever. That you are familiar with each other, you're intimate with each other. When we broke up, I really had to get used to how difficult it is for me. It takes time for me to learn to trust someone nearby my body and vice versa. (John)*

# CONCLUSION

# RELATIONSHIP EXPERIENCES FOLLOWING SEXUAL VIOLENCE

- ASV as an enduring vulnerability affects relationship expectations
  - Distrust in potential partners
    - <-> choosing distant/predictable/recognizable partners
  - Negative self-image
    - > feeling not worthy to be in a (supportive) relationship
- ASV as a stressor puts strain on relationships
  - Non-disclosure comes at a cost
  - Disclosure and negative reactions
- Supportive relationship as a corrective experience
- Importance of contextual info

# CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

- Challenge negative self-perceptions and negative self-worth
- Challenge distrust in others
- Challenge relationship expectations
- Focus on expression of needs
- Consider the broader history
- Explore disclosure processes and partner reactions
- Explore and alter communication patterns within couple



# LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

- Transferability instead of generalizability
- Only survivors who were willing to share their story
- Broad interview, however spontaneous
- Survivor's perspective (dyadic perspective possible for those in a relationship)

QUESTIONS?

SUGGESTIONS? TIPS?

IDEAS?

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# VULNERABILITY STRESS ADAPTATION MODEL OF RELATIONSHIP FUNCTIONING

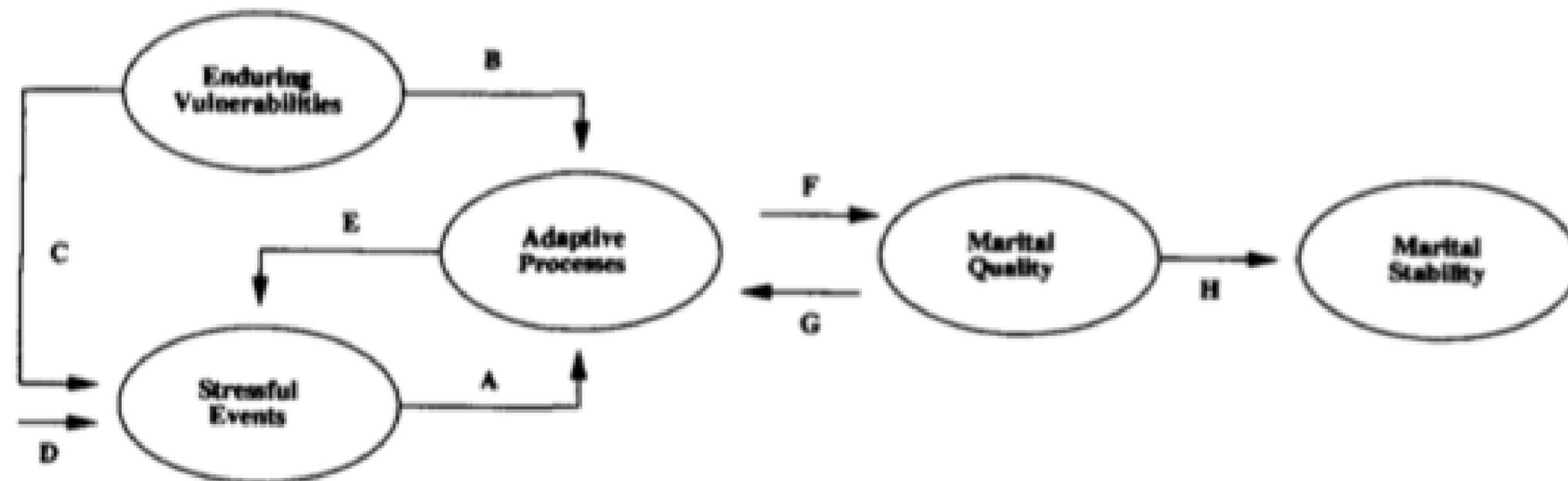
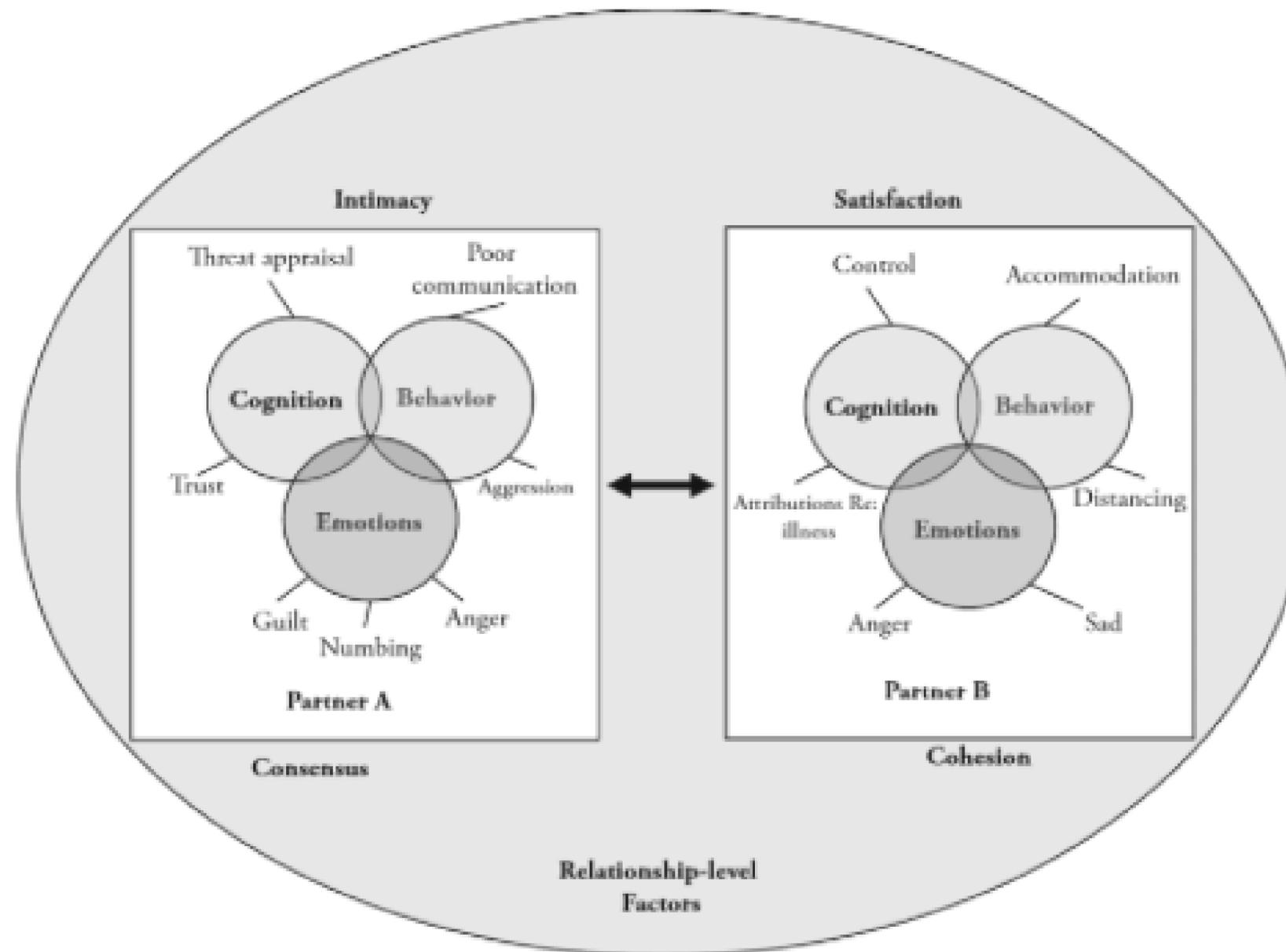


Figure 3. A vulnerability–stress–adaptation model of marriage.

# COGNITIVE-BEHAVIORAL INTERPERSONAL THEORY OF PTSD



Monson et al., 2010

Figure 15.1. Cognitive-behavioral interpersonal theory of posttraumatic stress disorder (Monson, Fredman, & Dekel, 2010).

# COUPLE ADAPTATION TO TRAUMATIC STRESS MODEL

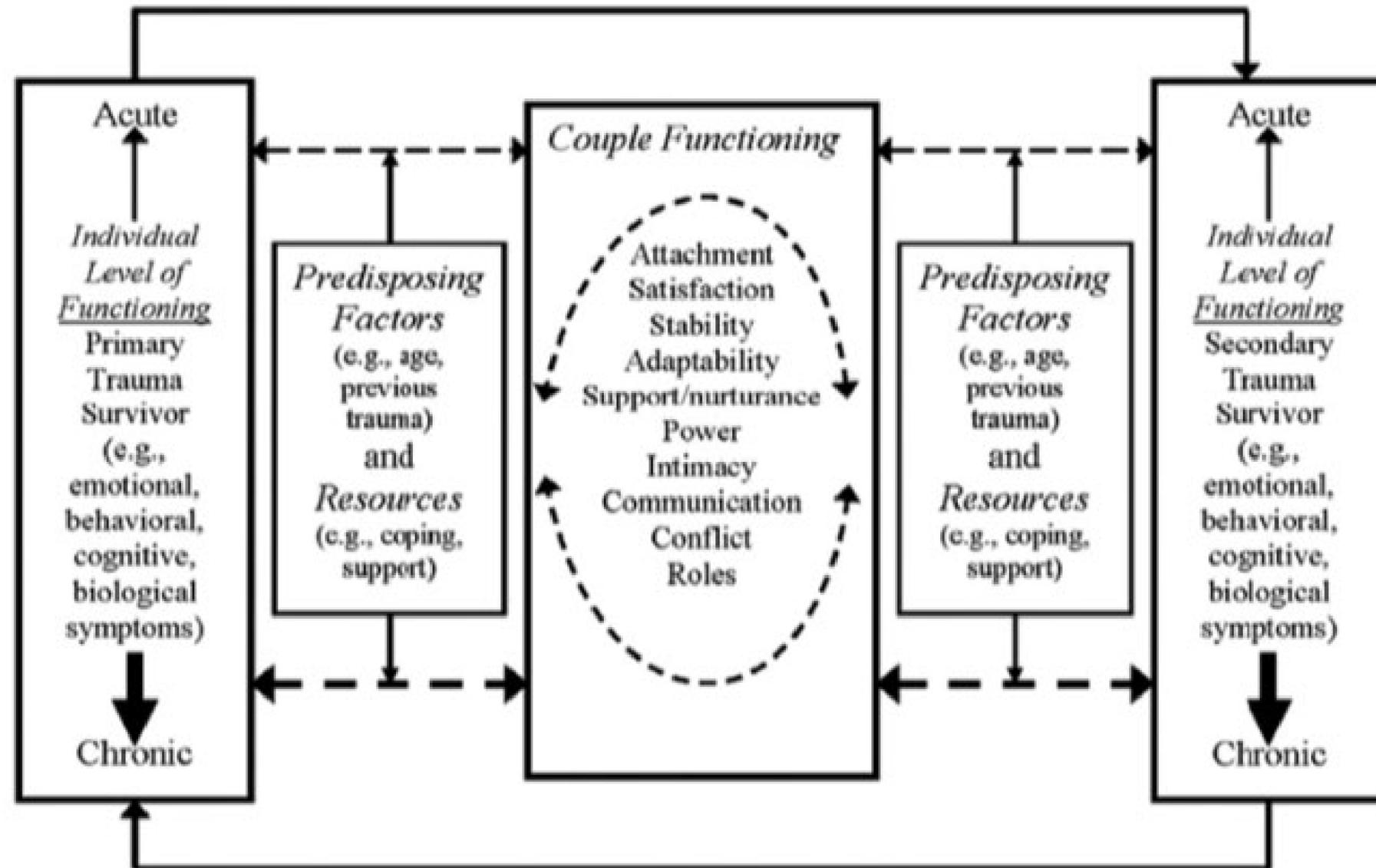


Figure 1. The Couple Adaptation to Traumatic Stress model (Nelson Goff & Smith, 2005).

# SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

\* Female assailant

Name	Gender	Sexual orientation	Context of sexual violence
Margret	Female	Male	2x Attempted rape by ex-partner
Sophie	Female	Male and female	CSA, oral rape at 17 by older co-worker, sexual harrassment by boss and date rape
Kate	Female	Male	Sexual harassment at 15, unacknowledged rape at 16 an acknowledged rape at 17 by strangers
Mary	Female	Male	Rape by acquaintance
Joyce	Female	Male and female	Date rape and multiple unacknowledged date rapes
Audrey	Female	Male	Rape by father as an adolescent, human trafficking
Kevin*	Male	Male and female	CSA, sexual harassment by partner, rape by acquaintance
Joanne	Female	Male	Rape, exhibitionism, sexual harassment, sexual intimidation
Michael	Male	Female	Multiple times sexual harassment, (attempted) rape from 14 years onwards by acquaintance
Abby	Female	Female	Years of CSA, 2 x sexual abuse, 3x rape
Anthony	Male	Female	Oral rape and sexual abuse by peers, sexual harassment by strangers
Patricia	Female	Male	Years of CSA by godfather/uncle, 2x sexual harassment by co-worker/acquaintance
John*	Male	Female	Rape by acquaintance, sexual harrassment by stranger
Ella	Female	Male	Multiple acknowledged and unacknowledged date rapes