

## **WHY IT CAN BE VERY DIFFICULT FOR WOMEN TO LEAVE CONTROLLING AND ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS**

One of the most perplexing questions for many professionals and laypeople alike is “*Why does she stay with him?*,” “*Why does she ‘let him’ treat her that way?*,” or “*Why doesn’t she just get the heck out of there?*” A similar question is often asked about a woman living with an alcoholic: “*Why does she put up with it?*” These are the questions that many people ask in frustration in response to their own feelings about domestic abuse and chemical dependency and their own powerlessness to intervene effectively. Dealing with a woman who is in an abusive relationship is a frightening proposition; most of us desperately want to find a solution. All too often, this comes in the form of a “quick fix.” If we see an easy answer to the woman’s dilemma, we want to tell her and then have her “just do it.”

When things don’t work out as we would hope, we tend to fall back on these familiar questions at the top of this article. These are often the questions that we can’t seem to stop asking. But these questions are not even really questions. Rather, they are judgments about and indictments of the woman and her “unwillingness” to get herself out of a “really bad situation.” They focus on the wrong person, assigning responsibility squarely to the victim for not stopping the abuse her partner is actually perpetrating against her and, if she cannot do that, then she should just get out. These questions seek to make a complex issue overly simple and unfortunately for us and for the woman, they are neither helpful nor enlightening.

This is a critical issue for most of us who work with or know women who are in abusive relationships. But the next time these questions pop into your mind, I’d like you to think about and ask yourself some other questions that may assist you in looking at this issue in a somewhat different light. Take a look at the questions below. They may offer you another important perspective.

**Instead of asking “*Why doesn’t she just leave the guy?*,” think about asking yourself:**

- *What’s wrong with her partner?*
- *Why does he talk to her and treat her the way that he does?*
- *What makes him think he can get away with being abusive and/or violent to her?*
- *Is the legal system taking this assault seriously (if violence has occurred)?*
- *Was he arrested for assaulting her?*
- *Has he been jailed for this assault?*
- *When will he be prosecuted and what kinds of consequences will he get for doing something like this to her?*
- *Are she and her children getting police protection to prevent this from happening again?*
- *Is there a way to keep him away from where she lives and works?*
- *Does she need any legal, housing, medical, or financial assistance at this point in her life?*

These are the sorts of questions that directly address who is responsible when abuse and violence occurs: the person who is actually perpetrating the abuse. They also address our responsibility as a society to make sure that women, children, and men have an absolute right to

feel safe and secure in their own homes. Women have difficulty leaving abusive relationships for all sorts of reasons. Most are valid and “make sense” if we take the time to stop and think about them. The rest of this article will focus on some of those reasons that women have difficulty leaving an abusive situation.

### **1) Fear about her own safety and the safety of others**

One important reason that a woman remains with an abuser is fear about her own safety and about the safety of anyone who might get in the abuser’s way. The most dangerous time for a battered woman is when she finally leaves her abuser. That is the time when she is most likely to be injured or even murdered. Women often know (or sense) this. And, even if they don’t, there are frequent “horror stories” in the media about women who leave and are found by their abusers, at which point they are terrorized, hurt, and, sometimes, even killed.

But, in addition to that, women are often fearful about being stalked or harassed at work and at home if they leave. Many women are clear that, if they are still living with their abusive partner, *“at least I know where he is and what he is doing.”* Her fears and her feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness may be reinforced by previous unsuccessful attempts to leave her abusive partner which might have involved unhelpful responses by clergy, counselors, the police, the courts, and others who were actually supposed to be assisting and protecting her.

Some of this fear is generated by direct threats of physical harm from her partner to her, their children, and her family and friends either during the course of the relationship or after she has left him. These threats may be as obvious as *“No matter where you try to hide, I’ll track you down and get you”* or less direct but still very powerful, *“I need you here. You know that, don’t you? You know what would happen if you walked out that door, right?”*

These threats might also include statements about taking or kidnapping the children, about using custody or visitation issues as a way to keep her from seeing her children, and about harassing or threatening her parents or friends if she leaves.

### **2) Economic pressures or concerns**

A second important reason that many women stay is economic pressure or very real financial concerns. This includes fears about being unable to support herself and her children. Often a woman feels particularly trapped by this if she has little education or few job skills (or has been out of the job market for a significant period of time) and leaving her abusive partner would mean that she and her children would experience a major lifestyle change in terms of their ability to survive financially. One woman might be worried continuously about not having enough money to buy groceries. Another might be fearful that she would not be able to afford rent or health insurance for herself and her children.

These economic concerns are further exacerbated by threats about financial retribution in the form of a long, “drawn-out,” contentious, and costly divorce process and fears that that their partners will continue to manipulate and control her through the finances which might include refusing to pay court-ordered child support and /or maintenance. Women who have been abused

also live with the “horror stories” about divorced women who have literally not been able to make it on their own.

### 3) Depression, shame, and “learned helplessness”

A third reason that women stay in an abusive relationship has to do with the depression, shame, and “learned helplessness” that often affects women who are in abusive relationships and their ability to cope. Many women who are abused experience depressive symptoms which is not surprising since they are living with an ongoing barrage of put-downs, humiliation, and threats. These symptoms can include difficulty concentrating and making decisions, difficulty sleeping and subsequent fatigue, a decreased level of energy and motivation, withdrawal and isolation from family and friends (often encouraged by her abusive partner), low self-esteem, and feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. All of these symptoms decrease her ability to function effectively and do what she needs to do in order to take good care of herself and leave.

In addition, there is an overwhelming sense of toxic shame marked by feelings of worthlessness, incompetence, and inadequacy which often contributes to these depressive symptoms. No matter what she tries to do or how she tries to change herself or her partner, the abuse continues unabated. She may feel too shameful to even talk about the abuse due to her fear that others might not believe her or might minimize what is actually going on. She may also fear that others will judge her for “putting up with” the abusive treatment she has received. She may feel shameful that her partner who says he loves her would, at the same time, abuse and violate her. She may feel shame that others will see her as “provoking” her partner and actually being the one who is responsible for his controlling and abusive behavior. Finally, she may feel shame about disrupting the notion, with her family and friends, that she and her partner have a “great relationship” and a “great family.”

Two other concepts related to depression are helpful in understanding her difficulty leaving an abusive relationship. One is the concept of “**learned helplessness**,” which Lenore Walker addressed in her book, *The Battered Woman* (1979). Laboratory research has demonstrated that, if an organism experiences painful stimuli beyond its control, it gradually loses the motivation to attempt to respond to these events even if it may have the power to influence the outcome. Walker cites experiments done by Martin Seligman who gave intermittent electric shocks to dogs in a cage. Initially, the dogs became agitated and ran around frantically looking for a way to escape. But eventually the dogs laid down, whimpered, and made no further efforts to avoid the shocks. Walker used this research to hypothesize that once a abused woman comes to believe that she is unable to control and influence the abuse that is occurring in the relationship, this perception becomes her reality and she does, in fact, become depressed, passive, and helpless.

The other concept that may be helpful in explaining a battered woman’s “lack of motivation to leave” has to do with what is called “the Stockholm Syndrome.” One study observed that, in life-threatening situations, hostages may identify and ally themselves with their criminal or terrorist captors to deal with the ongoing fear about being hurt or killed. We watched this phenomenon in action during the Patty Hearst kidnapping in the 1970’s. Ann Jones, in her book *Next Time She'll Be Dead* (1994), talks about the similarity between “the Stockholm Syndrome” and an abusive relationship as another way to help understand how some women may end up feeling completely

“trapped” or “stuck” in their relationship with an abusive partner. Men who try to control and abuse their partners essentially become “terrorists” and “bullies” in their own homes.

#### **4) Female socialization**

A fourth reason women may have difficulty leaving has to do with female socialization and strong cultural and family of origin messages directed at women about who they are supposed to be. Women in our society are taught to be emotional and physical caretakers of their partners and children. Part of this can involve the idea that she is at least partially responsible for the dysfunction that is going on in the family and certainly responsible for nurturing her partner and helping him become a non-abusive and respectful person. **HOPE** is a “four-letter word” for an abused woman as she often believes that, if she just “tries hard enough,” she can make her partner change and become a “better person” (i.e. non-abusive). It is often very difficult for her to “give up” and accept the notion that it is his choice to be controlling and abusive and that she has absolutely no control over this behavior (i.e. he is continually making his own choices).

In addition, her own family of origin experiences may have taught her that she, as a woman, did not have the right to expect respect and safety in the home, especially if she witnessed strong and rigid traditional roles or controlling and abusive behavior in her own family when she was growing up. Even if this was not the case, however, family of origin messages like “*No one in our family has ever gotten a divorce,*” cultural messages like “*It's a woman's job to keep the family together,*” and religious messages like “*Divorce is against God's law and just plain wrong*” can work against her making a decision to leave the relationship. These messages may also mean that she gets little support from other important people in her life who ascribe to these beliefs about her wanting to leave the abusive situation.

#### **5) A lack of knowledge about the community resources that are available to her**

A fifth reason women may stay has to do with a lack of knowledge of community resources. Battered women often believe that they have nowhere to go, especially if they live far away from other family members who might be supportive. They may not be aware of how to tap into temporary shelter and permanent housing, financial assistance, legal advocacy, and support groups or counseling. In addition, even if they have some awareness of resources, working with the “systems” to access those resources can often be a difficult and humiliating experience.

#### **6) Emotional dependency and real love for her partner**

A final reason women may have difficulty leaving has to do with emotional dependency on and genuine love for her partner. First of all, a battered woman frequently believes that “*No one else will want me.*” Her partner often badgers her with this statement and she may actually come to see this as a reality. She may experience fear about being alone as women are often socialized to believe that their worth is integrally connected to being with a man. Secondly, she may truly love her partner for who he is when he is not controlling and abusive with her. She may have experienced him as loving, kind, gentle, thoughtful, and playful in their time together and does not want to give up this part of what the relationship has been in the past. This is the reason that the deception (aka “honeymoon”) phase of the cycle of abuse and violence has such a powerful

effect in solidifying her victimization and her making the decision to continue to stay with her partner. She might say about her partner:

***“I wish you could have seen him (in the past). I know you wouldn’t believe it to look at him now, but he had a good sense of humor, and he could talk about places...he had dreams! He had friends! He was different from any man I had ever met...we had lots of plans to make a good life together.”***

Part of this reason also involves being concerned about her partner’s emotional and physical well-being if she leaves him. Women frequently worry that “*he has no one else in his life,*” think and ask herself “*will he really be able to take care of himself on his own?*,” and truly believe that he may hurt or kill himself if she “abandons” him and leaves their relationship.

All of the above are important and valid reasons that may make it very difficult for a woman to leave a controlling and abusive relationship. But more important than even these reasons is for us to stay aware of our tendency to make judgments about this issue, particularly about the woman who is being abused. Abuse and violence are wrong and, in some cases, illegal and it is the abuser who has the ultimate responsibility to address and change this hurtful and destructive behavior that has been a significant part of his life and his relationship with his partner.