

WHY A WOMAN MAY HAVE DIFFICULTY LEAVING AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP

Some Important Questions That Are Often Asked About Women Who Are In Abusive Relationships: *Why the hell does she stay with that guy? Why doesn't she just leave him and get out of the situation?*

- These are the kinds of questions that judges, county attorneys, police, therapists, medical care providers, friends, family, and others frequently ask in frustration as a response to the feelings battering generates in them and their own powerlessness to intervene effectively in the situation.
- Dealing with a battered woman is a frightening proposition:
...most of us want to find a “QUICK FIX” (and this may include the woman herself)
- If we see an answer to the woman’s dilemma, we want to find it and get it done. This is often not possible and, when confronted with this disturbing reality, we tend to fall back on these all-too-familiar questions.
- It is often these kinds of questions that we just can’t seem to stop asking.
- But these are not real questions. They, in fact, are a JUDGMENT and focuses on the wrong person, pinning the responsibility squarely on the VICTIM for not stopping her partner’s abuse and violence and for not keeping herself (and her children) safe from him and his abusive behavior.
- These questions seek to make a complex and complicated issue much too simple.

Here is an clear and specific example of how this process gets played out (from the book *Next Time, She’ll Be Dead* by Ann Jones)

- In October 1987, a local NYC affiliate of CBS included in the nightly news a segment on the case of Karen Straw, a 29-year-old woman about to stand trial for murder.
- Karen had left her husband, Clifton, in 1984 after a 3-year marriage, and moved with her children to a welfare hotel.
...she wanted a divorce but couldn’t afford one.
- For more than two years, her husband harassed and beat her, despite her obtaining OFPs and trying at least 10 times to have him arrested and prosecuted.
- In December 1986, he broke into her room, beat her, raped her at knifepoint in front of the children and threatened to kill her; she was able to get hold of a kitchen knife and stabbed him to death.
- The WCBS report filed by reporter Bree Walker showed footage of Karen, the Queens courthouse where she was to be tried, and short bites of three previously-recorded interviews with:
...her attorney,
...a battered woman who had killed her abuser, and
...a domestic violence expert who went into some detail about how she had left and attempted to use the legal system to protect herself and her children.
- The essence of the story that Walker presented was that this woman was only “one of many battered wives recently compelled to defend themselves when a weak and ineffectual criminal justice system failed them again and again.”
- After all this, however, came the standard question from Jim Jensen, one of the anchors:
...he said: “*Why would one murder her husband instead of just walking away?*”

- Even more remarkable, though, was reporter Walker’s reply.
 ...she began to go into an explanation of why Karen, a woman who had, in fact, walked away many times, had not actually left:
 ...she started by saying, *“There are a lot of different reasons—-helplessness, dependence...”*
- At this point, anchorman Jensen interrupted, sounding angry as if he were scolding Walker for her point of view and said to her:
 ...*“Well, if they’re dependent on them, when they kill ‘em, they’ve lost their dependence, haven’t they?”*
- Walker looked startled and responded,
 ...*“Well, certainly. Yes. It’s an ugly confusing problem.”*
- There were a few moments of awkward silence and then the other anchorperson jumped in to talk about the weather.
- His question completely overlooked Clifton Straw’s violence and terrorism; gone too was the important public issue of the failure of the police and the courts to protect Karen Straw that Walker had presented in her report, magically replaced by the personal problem of just another “dumb woman” who took the law into her own hands.
- This is a critical issue for anyone who works with battered women and the issue of domestic violence.
- The next time this question (*“Why in the world does she stay with him?”* OR *“Why doesn’t she just leave?”*) is said to you by someone else or enters your mind, try to think about some other salient questions that may help you look at the situation a bit differently:

- ***WHAT’S WRONG WITH THAT MAN?***

- ***WHY DOES HE DO THAT TO HER?***

- ***WHAT MAKES HIM THINK HE CAN GET AWAY WITH IT?***

- ***IS THE LEGAL SYSTEM TAKING THIS SERIOUSLY?***

- ***WAS HE ARRESTED FOR HIS ABUSIVE BEHAVIOR?***

- ***IS HE NOW IN JAIL?***

- ***WHEN WILL HE BE PROSECUTED AND WHAT KINDS OF CONSEQUENCES WILL HE GET FOR DOING THIS TO HER?***

- ***ARE SHE AND HER CHILDREN RECEIVING ADEQUATE POLICE PROTECTION?***

- ***DID THE COURT EVICT HIM FROM THEIR RESIDENCE?***

- ***DOES SHE NEED ANY OTHER TYPE OF HELP AND ASSISTANCE (MEDICAL, LEGAL, HOUSING, FINANCIAL) AT THIS POINT?***

- These are the sorts of questions that directly address WHO is responsible when abuse and violence occur and that address our responsibility as a society to make sure that women, children, and men have an absolute right to be free from disrespectful and abusive behavior

- Women stay for all sorts of the “right” reasons. We as helping professionals need to be aware of our tendency to make a very complex situation into something that is much too “simplistic.”

SOME OF THE REASONS THAT WOMEN MAY HAVE DIFFICULTY LEAVING ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

1) HER FEAR AND THE POTENTIAL FOR RETALIATION AND DANGER AND VERY REAL THREATS TO HER SAFETY FROM HER PARTNER

- The increased risk of danger if she makes the decision to leave
 - ...a woman often thinks to herself: *“At least I know where he is and what he is doing (which means I can keep an eye on him)”*
 - ...fears about being harassed or stalked if she leaves and belief that real safety is not even possible and attainable for her
 - ...he has often brainwashed her into believing this
 - ...her fears and feelings of powerlessness are reinforced by previous unsuccessful attempts to leave and also involve the unhelpful responses of clergy, counselors, police, and the courts
- This includes very real threats about physical harm to her, the children, and her extended family
 - ...*“I’ll hunt you down find you and get you no matter where you go”*
 - ...*“I’ll get your parents (sisters, brothers/friends) if you ever try to leave me”*
 - ... This actually happens all too frequently: threats and violence often escalate and the potential for being murdered actually increases when a woman leaves an abusive relationship (Casanave & Zahn, 1986; Browne & Williams, 1987 and 1989)
 - ...A VIDEO EXAMPLE: *My Husband Is Going To Kill Me*
- Threats about taking or kidnapping the children
 - ...*“If you divorce me, the kids and I are out of here and you will never see them again”*
- Threats about custody
 - ...*“If you leave, I’ll get full custody and I’ll make sure you won’t have any time at all with the kids in the future”*
- Threats about financial retribution (a long, contentious, and costly divorce, refusing to pay any child support):
 - ...*“I can drag this divorce out forever; my attorney is a “pit bull” and will really ‘stick it to you”*
 - ...*“You will never get any money from me so don’t expect that you will”*
- “Horror stories” about divorced women not being able to make it on their own financially and emotionally

2) SIGNIFICANT AND VERY REAL ECONOMIC PRESSURES, LIMITATIONS, AND CONCERNS

- Fears about being unable to support herself and the children
- Fears about her partner using finances to continue to manipulate and control her (e.g. refusing to pay child support)

- Fears about a major lifestyle change
 - ...e.g. in her living situation and in her ability to meet her children's needs
 - ...e.g. *"I can't even buy my son a new bicycle"*
- Fears about having little education and few job skills
 - ...especially if she has been a homemaker and primary caregiver for many years
- Fears about loss of health insurance to take care of her own and her children's medical needs
- The most likely predictor of whether a battered woman will permanently separate from her abuser is whether she has the economic resources to survive
 - ...battered women need to receive support awards in protection orders

3) HER LACK OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT AND AWARENESS OF COMMUNITY AND OTHER RESOURCES AND OPTIONS

- She may believe she has absolutely nowhere to go
 - ...she may not be aware of battered women's shelters, permanent housing, financial assistance, food stamps, legal advocates, support groups and/or counseling, job training and employment opportunities
- The system is hard to navigate and the process can be shaming and humiliating for the woman
 - ...e.g. having to apply for food stamps or welfare
 - ...advocates can be an important part of her learning to do this and can provide necessary emotional and other kinds of support in the process of her moving on

4) HER DEPRESSION, ANXIETY, "LEARNED HELPLESSNESS," AND SHAME

- Depressive symptoms: difficulty concentrating/making decisions; difficulty sleeping, fatigue, decreased energy/motivation, withdrawal/isolation from friends and family; low self-esteem (each abusive incident lowers her self-esteem, self-respect, and self-confidence); her feelings of helplessness/hopelessness/powerlessness
- Toxic shame which leads to becoming isolated and withdrawn with no emotional support:
 - ...not wanting to disrupt the notion that she has the "perfect family"
 - ...fear about telling others what is actually going on in her relationship with her partner
 - ...not wanting to be judged and shamed by others:
 - ...*"If anyone did that to me, I'd be out of there ASAP;" "I would never put up with that kind of treatment from a man in my life"*
 - ...fear that others will deny and will not believe her about the abuse that is occurring:
 - ...*"I just can't believe that he would never say (or do) something like that to you"*
 - ...fear that others will trivialize and minimize the abuse (which often occurs)
 - ...doctors prescribing medications to help her "cope" with her situation
 - ...ministers recommending prayer and more "accommodating" behaviors with her partner *"so he won't get so mad"*
 - ...counselors advising trying to improve her "communication" with the abuser and urging her *"to look at her 'part' in the abuse problem"*
 - ...blaming herself for "provoking" him and feeling completely responsible for his abuse and violence toward her:
 - ...which he may be telling her continually

- ...feeling shame that someone who says he loves her would control and abuse her
 - ...this often proves to her that she is bad, defective, and “the real problem in the relationship”
- **Becoming completely isolated with little or no emotional connection and support**
 - ...abusers often intentionally try hard to separate their partner from her previous support system due to their demand for exclusive attention and absolute obedience
 - ...e.g. family and friends who are perceived as a threat to his control
 - ...she often feels fearful that others will not believe her about the abuse
- **“Learned helplessness” (from the Martin Seligman research)**
 - ...Seligman gave intermittent electric shocks to dogs in cages; initially the dog became agitated and ran around frantically looking for a way to escape from the pain
 - ...eventually, the dogs stopped trying to find a way out and instead developed ineffective and even strange coping skills to try to minimize the discomfort they were experiencing
 - ...this included things that would otherwise be considered unhealthy or bizarre but, in fact, the dogs were simply trying to adapt to an inescapable situation
 - ...lying in their own excrement for insulation from the shocks
 - ...curling into uncomfortable positions on the area of the floor where the shocks were the weakest
 - ...even when the doors were opened, the dogs did not leave the cages but instead kept using the ineffective coping responses that they had developed to try to address the situation
 - ...they had to be retrained to learn the normal escape response and, once they did, the ineffective coping behaviors disappeared
 - ...a battered woman experience a similar process when dealing with constant degradation, unpredictability, and insecurity in the face of ever-increasing abuse and violence
 - ...she is essentially trained to develop new (and what many people think of as nonsensical) coping skills because she is no longer able to predict the effect of her behavior on the batterer and his controlling and abusive actions
 - ...e.g. scurrying around the house to pick up just before the abuser returns home in the evening after work
 - ...the control skills used by batterers resemble the brainwashing practiced by Nazi concentration camp soldiers and prisoner of war guards
 - ...they include many of the techniques identified by Amnesty International as psychological torture, including:
 - ...isolation; monopolization of perception; induced exhaustion and debility; threats; demonstrations of complete power, degradation, and humiliation; demanding and enforcing trivial demands; and occasional indulgences (i.e. the “deception” [honeymoon] phase of the cycle of violence)
- **“Traumatic bonding” (the “Stockholm Syndrome”):**
 - ...first identified by sociologists who studied a group of people who had been held hostage during a bank holdup in Sweden
 - ...oddly, when the crisis was over, the hostages defended their captors and projected “positive” motives onto them for their criminal behavior

- ...the captives/hostages ally themselves to the terrorist/perpetrator to try and find safety in a dangerous and threatening situation and to stay alive and deal with the ongoing fear about being hurt by the captors
- ...this may help explain why a battered woman sometimes actually buys into her abuser's statements that he is trying to make her a better person, only punishing and abusing her "for her own good"
- Few outsiders realize that being a battered woman often feels like being a prisoner who could be hurt or killed at any moment at the hands of her jailer

5) FEMALE SOCIALIZATION/CULTURAL AND FAMILY OF ORIGIN MESSAGES THAT SHE HAS RECEIVED

- Holding unrealistic beliefs that she is:
 - ...ultimately responsible for the abuse and violence that he perpetrates against her
 - ...*"It's my fault that he's violent;" "If I was a better person/wife, he wouldn't treat me this way"*
 - ...ultimately responsible for helping or making him change his controlling and abusive behavior
 - ...*"I have to be there for him;" "He can't do it without me;" "I'm his only chance to change and be different"*
- Family of origin messages (from a woman's own childhood):
 - ...*"No one in our family has ever gotten a divorce," "You'll be a failure if you can't make your marriage work and you end up leaving your husband"*
 - ...*"The break-up of a family is always the woman's fault"*
 - ...*"It's just not fair to the kids to leave their father"*
 - ...*"You're only hurting the kids if you decide to divorce him"*
 - ... i.e. it's disruptive to their lives, e.g. having to go to a new school, having to make new friends
 - ...Her own family of origin experiences that did not teach her that she has a right to respect and safety in her own home as an adult
 - ...if she witnessed rigid traditional or stereotypical male and female roles or witnessed or experienced control and abuse in her childhood home
- Cultural and societal messages:
 - ...*"It's a woman's job to take care of the family's emotional needs, take responsibility for her man's happiness and emotional well-being, and keep the family together at any cost"*
- Religious messages:
 - ...*"The family should remain together no matter what is going on"*
 - ...*"Divorce is wrong and against God's law"*
 - ...*"The man is the head of the household and the woman should bend herself to his will"*

6) A LACK OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT WHAT ABUSE IS AND THAT ABUSE IS WRONG (AND THAT VIOLENCE IS AGAINST THE LAW) AND IS NOT HER FAULT

- Her own tendency to deny, minimize, justify, rationalize his behavior:
 - ...*“It’s not all that bad”* (especially compared to movies like *“The Burning Bed”*)
 - ...*“He’s not like that all the time. He can be really nice sometimes”*
 - ...*“He’s been a good provider for me and the kids”*
- Often women don’t talk to anyone about what is occurring due to their own shame about being in this situation
 - ...she blames herself for the abuse he perpetrates against her
 - ...and she often gets this very same message from her partner

7) THE HOPE THAT “THINGS WILL SOMEHOW BE DIFFERENT”

- HOPE is often a “four-letter word” for many battered women
- Many batterers become remorseful after inflicting violence on their partners
 - ...when the batterer admits the error of his ways, when he breaks down and cries in despair, and concedes the need for change (promising never to hit again, agreeing to get counseling, pointing out the stresses he is under, acknowledging how wrong the abuse is for his partner and their the children), hope is often born anew for the battered woman
 - ...at this point, he seems to take the issue seriously
- A belief that if she just “tries hard enough,” she can make him change and want to be different
 - ...i.e. she holds the key to his changing and being a different person
 - ...it is difficult for her to give up/acknowledge and accept that it is his choice to be abusive and violent and that he has to make the decision and take the actions to change it by himself
- A belief that he will actually change and stop being abusive with her (and their children)
 - ...especially if he’s been arrested and taken to jail or if he’s in therapy or in a treatment program
 - ...although many women do actually leave their partners when they are in a treatment program because they then believe that he is safer and someone else has the responsibility to help him, take care of him, or make him change

8) SOME POTENTIAL AND SOME VERY REAL AND SIGNIFICANT LOSSES

- Loss of economic status
- Loss of friends/extended family/neighborhood/community
- Loss of privacy: legal and court-related issues may become public information
- Loss of dreams about what her life and the marriage could have been and what she had expected when she went into their relationship

9) HER EMOTIONAL DEPENDENCY ON HER PARTNER

- She may have a strong belief that *“No one else will ever love me or want me again”*
... often her partner has given her that very message again and again in their time together
- She may struggle with issues related to her own family of origin and cultural messages about:
...what she can expect from men in her life
...what it means to be in a relationship with a partner
- She may have strong fears about being “alone” (i.e. without a partner)
...women are often socialized to believe that their only real worth is connected to being involved with a man

10) THE REAL AND GENUINE LOVE THAT SHE HAS FELT FOR HER PARTNER AT TIMES IN THEIR RELATIONSHIP TOGETHER

- She may love the positive aspects of who he is when he is not abusive: she may have experienced him as caring, kind, gentle, thoughtful, playful and does not want to give up those parts of him
...*“He can be really good to me and the kids at times”*
- This is the reason the “deception” or “honeymoon” phase has such a powerful effect on solidifying her victimization in the relationship
- Many women say they truly love their partners, but they just want the control, abuse, and violence to end
- Often she is fearful about his hurting himself or even committing suicide if she leaves him
- She may also have worry and concern about his emotional and physical well-being
...*“Will he even be able to take care of himself without me there to help him?”*
- She may pity him; he may have few or no friends/no emotional connection/no one else in his life besides her who is truly close to him

IT IS ABSOLUTELY CRITICAL TO REMEMBER THAT LEAVING AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP IS A “PROCESS” FOR WOMEN WHO ARE IN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS (IT IS ALMOST NEVER A DISCRETE AND SINGULAR EVENT)

- **MOST BATTERED WOMEN LEAVE AND RETURN SEVERAL TIMES BEFORE PERMANENTLY SEPARATING FROM THEIR ABUSER**
- **THE FIRST TIME A WOMAN LEAVES MAY BE A “TEST” TO SEE WHETHER HE WILL ACTUALLY GET SOME HELP FOR HIS CONTROLLING AND ABUSIVE ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS**
...THIS IS OFTEN A TIME WHEN MEN SEEK TREATMENT
- **WHEN SHE LEAVES THE NEXT TIME, SHE MAY TRY TO GET MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE RESOURCES AND OPTIONS AVAILABLE TO HER**
- **SHE MAY THEN RECONCILE AND BEGIN TO EXPLORE HOUSING, ECONOMIC, WORK, AND EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES IN CASE SHE DECIDES TO LEAVE AT A FUTURE POINT**

- **MOST BATTERED WOMEN EVENTUALLY LEAVE THEIR ABUSERS (OKUN, 1986)**
- **WHEN FRIENDS, FAMILY, AND HELPING AGENCIES LEND SUBSTANTIAL AND CONCERTED EFFORTS TO ASSIST BATTERED WOMEN IN THE LEAVING PROCESS, THESE WOMEN ARE MUCH MORE LIKELY TO LEAVE AND SECURE PROTECTION AND SAFETY FOR THEMSELVES AND THEIR CHILDREN**
- **WHEN BATTERED WOMEN STAY, IT IS IMPORTANT, AS A COMMUNITY, TO LOOK TO SEE WHAT WE MAY BE DOING TO HINDER THE LEAVING PROCESS AND THEN MAKE CHANGES TO DO WHAT WE CAN DO TO FACILITATE HER LEAVING AND THE ULTIMATE SAFETY OF THE WOMAN AND HER CHILDREN**