

**WHY DOES SHE STAY WITH HER PARTNER?  
OR  
WHY DOESN'T SHE JUST LEAVE THE GUY?**

- This is the question that judges, county attorneys, police, therapists, medical care providers, friends, family, and others frequently ask in frustration as a response to the feelings domestic abuse generates in them and their own powerlessness to intervene.
- Dealing with a woman who is being abused by her partner is a frightening proposition:  
...most of us want to find a “QUICK FIX”
- 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 reality, we tend to fall back on the familiar questions noted above.
- These are often the kinds of questions that we can’t seem to stop asking.
- But these are not real questions. In fact, it is a JUDGMENT and focuses on the wrong person, pinning responsibility squarely on the VICTIM for not stopping her partner’s abuse and violence and keeping herself safe from him.
- It seeks to make a complex issue much too simple.

**Let me give you an example of how this gets played out (*From Next Time, She’ll Be Dead* by Ann Jones**

- In October 1987, 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 at that time 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 12-86, 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,  
...another 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 criminal justice system again and again failed them.”
- After all this, however, came the standard question from Jim Jensen, one of the news 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 actually not 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:  
     ...*“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 issue for most of us who work with or know women who are in abusive relationships.
- The next time this question (*“Why in the world does she stay with him?”* OR *“Why doesn’t she just leave the relationship?”*) enters your mind, I’d like you to think about some other questions that may help you look at the situation a little differently:

- ***WHAT’S WRONG WITH THAT MAN?***
- ***WHY DOES HE DO THAT TO HER?***
- ***WHAT MAKES HIM THINK HE CAN GET AWAY WITH THIS KIND OF BEHAVIOR?***
  - ***IS THE LEGAL SYSTEM TAKING THIS SERIOUSLY?***
  - ***WAS HE ARRESTED IF HE WAS VIOLENT WITH HER?***
    - ***IS HE IN 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 REMOVE 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 and supportive family and friends need to be aware of our tendency to make a very complex situation much too “simple.”

## **SOME SIGNIFICANT REASONS WHY WOMEN MAY HAVE DIFFICULTY LEAVING CONTROLLING AND ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS**

### **1) GENUINE FEAR AND THE POTENTIAL FOR RETALIATION FROM HER PARTNER AND VERY REAL DANGER AND THREAT FOR HER**

- A woman may think to herself: *“At least I know where he is and what he is doing (which means I can keep an eye on him)”*
- She may have fears about being harassed or stalked if she leaves and the belief that real safety is not possible and attainable for her  
...he has often brainwashed her into actually believing this
- Her fears and feelings of powerlessness may be reinforced by previous unsuccessful attempts to leave and also may involve unhelpful responses of family, friends, clergy, counselors, police, and the courts in the past
- Threats about her partner doing physical harm to her, the children, and her extended family  
...*“I’ll find you and get you no matter where you go”*  
...*“I’ll get your parents (sisters, brothers) if you ever leave me”*  
... This actually happens all too frequently: threats and violence often increase and the potential for being murdered actually increases when a woman leaves an abusive relationship (Casanave & Zahn, 1986; Browne & Williams, 1987 and 1989)
- Threats about taking or kidnapping the children  
...*“If you divorce me, the kids and I are out of here and you’ll never see them again”*
- Threats about custody and visitation  
...*“If you ever leave me, I’ll get custody and I’ll make sure you won’t have any time with the kids”*
- Threats about financial retribution (e.g. a long, contentious, and costly divorce, refusing to pay child support):  
...*“I can drag this divorce out forever”*  
...*“You’re never going to get any money from me”*
- “Horror stories” about divorced women not being able to make it on their own financially and emotionally

### **2) SIGNIFICANT ECONOMIC PRESSURES/LIMITATIONS/CONCERNS**

- Her fears about being unable to support herself and the children
- Her fears about her partner using finances to continue to manipulate and control her (e.g. refusing to pay child support)
- Her fears about having to make a major lifestyle change  
...e.g. in her living situation and her ability to meet her kids’ needs  
...*“I can’t even buy my son a new bicycle”*
- Her fears about having little education and few job skills  
...especially if she has been a homemaker and primary caregiver for many years
- Her fear about the 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 often need to receive financial support awards in protection orders

### 3) A LACK OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT AND AWARENESS OF COMMUNITY RESOURCES AND OTHER OPTIONS AVAILABLE TO HER

- She may truly believe she has nowhere to go
  - ...she may not be aware of battered women's shelters, temporary and permanent housing, financial assistance, food stamps, legal advocates, support groups and/or counseling, job training and employment and educational opportunities
- The "system" is often hard to navigate and the process can be shaming and humiliating for the woman
  - ...e.g. her having to apply for food stamps or welfare
  - ...advocates can be an important part of helping her learn to do this

### 4) DEPRESSION, "LEARNED HELPLESSNESS," AND SHAME

- She may have significant depressive symptoms: difficulty concentrating/making decisions; difficulty sleeping, fatigue, decreased energy/motivation, withdrawal/isolation from friends and extended family; low self-esteem (each abusive incident further lowers her self-esteem); feelings of helplessness/hopelessness/powerlessness
- She may experience shame which leads to becoming isolated, withdrawn, and more depressed with little or no emotional support:
  - ...her not wanting to disrupt the idea that they have the "perfect" family
  - ...her fear about telling others what is actually happening in their relationship
    - ...her not wanting to be judged/shamed by other people who know about her situation:
      - ...*"If anyone did that to me, I'd be out of there fast;" "I would never put up with that kind of treatment from a man"*
    - ...her fear that others will deny and will not believe her about the abuse:
      - ...*"I just can't believe that he would never say (or do) something like that"*
    - ...her 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
      - ...counselors advising that she try to improve her "communication" with the abuser and "to look at her 'part' in the problem"
    - ...her blaming herself for "provoking" him and her feeling completely responsible for his abuse and violence:
      - ...her partner may be telling her this constantly
    - ...her feeling shame that someone who says he loves her would be controlling and abusive with her
      - ...this often proves to her that she is "bad, defective, and the 'real problem' in the relationship"

- **Her becoming completely isolated with no emotional connection and support**
  - ...abusers often intentionally try to separate their partner from her previous support system due to their expectation and demand for exclusive attention and absolute obedience
    - ...e.g. family and friends are often perceived as a threat to his control
  - ...she is fearful that others will not believe her about the abuse
- **The concept of “learned helplessness” (from Martin Seligman research)**
  - ...they gave intermittent electric shocks to dog in cage; initially the dog was agitated and ran around frantically looking for a way to escape
  - ...eventually, the dogs stopped trying to find a way out and instead developed 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, they were simply adapting to a situation where they had absolutely no power to affect the outcome
      - ...e.g. lying in their own excrement for insulation from the shocks
      - ...e.g. 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 coping responses that they had developed
  - ...they had to be retrained to learn the normal escape response and, once they did, their coping behaviors completely disappeared
  - ...abused women can experience a similar process when dealing with constant degradation, unpredictability, and insecurity in the face of ever-increasing abuse and violence
    - ...a woman 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 her abusive partner
      - ...e.g. scurrying around the house to pick up just before her partner returns home in the evening so he won’t get angry about a “messy house”
  - ...the control tactics 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; enforcing trivial demands; and occasional indulgences (i.e. the “deception” [aka honeymoon] phase of the cycle of violence)
- **“Traumatic bonding” (the “Stockholm Syndrome”):**
  - ...this was first identified by sociologists who studied a group of people who had been held hostage during a bank robbery in Sweden
  - ...oddly, when the crisis was finally over, the hostages defended their captors and projected “positive” motives onto them for their crime
  - ...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
  - ...this may help explain why a woman who is being abused sometimes actually buys into her abuser’s statements that he is trying to make her a better person
    - ...controlling, punishing, and abusing her “for her own good”

- Few outsiders fully realize that being a battered woman feels like being a prisoner who could be hurt or killed at any moment at the hands of her jailer

## 5) FEMALE SOCIALIZATION AND UNHEALTHY CULTURAL AND FAMILY OF ORIGIN MESSAGES SHE HAS RECEIVED

- Her holding beliefs that she is:
  - ...responsible for the abuse 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”*
  - ...responsible for helping or making him change
    - ...*“I have to be there for him;” “He can’t do it without me;” “I’m his only chance to be different”*
- Family of origin messages (from a woman’s childhood or even during her adult years):
  - ...*“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 not fair to make the kids leave their father”*
  - ...*“You’re really going to hurt the kids if you divorce him”*
    - ... i.e. *“It’s disruptive to their lives: going 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
    - ...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 she receives:
  - ...*“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”*
- Religious messages she receives:
  - ...*“The family should remain together no matter what”*
  - ...*“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 IS NOT HER “FAULT”

- Her own tendency to deny, minimize, justify, and 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 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
    - ...she often gets this very same message from her partner

## **7) THE HOPE THAT HE WILL ACTUALLY CHANGE:**

- **“HOPE” is a “four-letter word” for many women who are in abusive relationships**
- **Many abusive men become remorseful after inflicting abuse and/or violence on their partners**
  - ...when the abusive man admits the error of his ways, when he breaks down and cries in despair, and concedes the need for him to change (promising never to “blow up” again, telling her he will “cut back” or stop doing other unhealthy behaviors [e.g. drinking too much], agreeing to get counseling or go into a program, pointing out the stresses he is experiencing as the reason for his control and abuse, acknowledging how wrong the abuse is for his partner and their the children), hope is often born anew for the woman that “things can really change” in him and in their relationship**
  - ...he really seems to be taking the issue seriously at this point**
- **Hope that if she just tries hard enough (i.e. is a “good enough partner”), she can make him change**
  - ...the idea that she holds the key to his changing and being different**
  - ...it is difficult 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**
- **Hope that he will actually change and stop being abusive**
  - ...especially if he’s been arrested and taken to jail or if he’s in therapy or a treatment program**
  - ...although many women actually do leave their partner when he is in a treatment program because they then believe that he is safer and now someone else has the responsibility to help or make him change**

## **8) SOME POTENTIAL AND VERY REAL LOSSES IN HER AND HER CHILDREN’S LIVES:**

- **Loss of economic status and financial resources**
- **Loss of friends, a neighborhood, and a sense of community**
- **Loss of privacy: legal and court-related issues become public information**
- **Loss of dreams about what her life and the marriage could have been and what she had hoped for and expected**

## **9) AN EMOTIONAL DEPENDENCY ON HER PARTNER:**

- **A belief that “*No one else will ever love me or want me again*”**
  - ... often her partner has given her that very message over and over**
- **Issues related to her own family of origin messages about:**
  - ...what she can expect from men and**
  - ...what it means to be in a relationship with a partner**
- **Fears about being alone**
  - ...women are often socialized to believe that their only real worth is connected to being involved with a man**

## **10) A REAL AND GENUINE LOVE FOR HER PARTNER**

- She may love the positive aspects of who he is when he is not abusive: she has 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 that the “deception” or “honeymoon” phase has such a powerful effect on solidifying her victimization in the relationship
- Most women say they truly love their partners, but they just want the abuse and the violence (if it is present) to end
- Often she is fearful about his hurting himself or committing suicide if she leaves
- She may feel truly worried and concerned about his emotional and physical well-being ...*“Will he be able to take care of himself without me there?”*
- She also may pity him: He may have no friends, no emotional connection, and no one else in his life besides her who is truly emotionally connected to him

## **IT IS ABSOLUTELY CRITICAL TO REMEMBER THAT “LEAVING IS A PROCESS” FOR WOMEN IN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS**

- **MOST WOMEN IN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS 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 ACTUALLY DO SEEK COUNSELING AND TREATMENT
- **WHEN SHE LEAVES THE NEXT TIME, SHE MAY TRY TO GET MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE RESOURCES AND OPTIONS THAT ARE AVAILABLE TO HER**
- **SHE MAY THEN RECONCILE AND BEGIN TO EXPLORE HOUSING, ECONOMIC, WORK, AND EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES IN CASE SHE DECIDES TO LEAVE AT SOME FUTURE POINT**
- **MOST ABUSED WOMEN EVENTUALLY DO LEAVE (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 FOR THEMSELVES AND THEIR CHILDREN**
- **WHEN WOMEN MAKE THE DECISION TO 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 AS MUCH AS WE CAN TO HELP FACILITATE HER LEAVING AND, ULTIMATELY, FINDING SAFETY FOR HERSELF AND HER CHILDREN IF HER PARTNER IS UNWILLING TO CHANGE**