

Why Does She Stay?

By P.B. Poorman, edited by Susan L. Simmons

This article offers another point of view about why women stay in abusive relationships. Although it is not comprehensive, it does list some issues that may factor into a person's reasons for staying in a relationship in which she is abused.

What keeps women in relationships in which they are abused? Usually, this question is asked as an indictment of the abuse victim. It is important to note that answering this question will not explain why abuse continues to occur. It is the unequivocal position of the author that responsibility for causing and continuing abuse rests with the perpetrator of the abuse and not with the victim. The purpose of this article is to list the most frequently reported reasons for staying in a relationship in which one is abused. The sample from which this information is derived is comprised of hundreds of women from various ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, class and educational backgrounds and sexual/affectual orientations.

Fear/Terror

Several different, intense and reality based fears play a major role in holding women, terrified of leaving in a relationship in which they are or have been abused.

Fear of harm or death

Most women who are abused learn that to be independent in any way (in thought, feelings, beliefs, actions etc.) is very threatening to their abusive partner. When the partner feels threatened, the potential for abuse to occur is the greatest. The abusive partner fears the loss of control (power in the relationship). Thus, in leaving even for a short time, an act of independence, a woman who is abused runs the very real risk that hard or greater harm will ensue.

Fear that no safety can be found

Often, an abusive partner threatens to harass, pursue or abuse a woman forever. The dynamics of abuse actualize this threat. The abusing partner appears capable of and motivated to pursue, find and harm her anywhere. This fear is further reinforced if the woman has attempted unsuccessfully to find safety before or if she has been in a previous abusive relationship.

Fear of harm to another

Partners who abuse often threaten suicide or harm to others if the survivor leaves. These threats are sometimes acted on. Because of women's strong moral imperative of care for others, the abused woman often feels responsible for this projected harm. The fear of this can be as strong a motivation to stay as it would if she was the one in danger. In fact, women are often willing to put the safety of others before their own safety. Sometimes, women are motivated to leave only when they fear for the safety of their children.

Fear of being without a partner

In our country, women are socialized to believe that there is not a worse position for a woman than to be without a primary relationship. To be without a relationship is to risk all of the familiar derogatory social messages and sanctions. This reinforces the idea that one's worth is measured by the ability to find, secure and maintain a relationship, even if the relationship is a harmful one.

Guilt/Shame

A partner who abuses rarely admits responsibility for the abusive behavior, and the victim of the abuse is generally accused and blamed. "If only you had...or hadn't..." In time the victim comes to believe his and beings to search for the way to avoid being abused. With this search comes a false sense of being able to control of contain the abuse. Frequently, she stays in the relationship hoping that she will and believing that she can figure out the way to stop the abuse. She also believes she may even deserve the abuse. If not, she reasons, it couldn't happening to her. Under these circumstances, she imagines that others must believe that she could have done something to end it. There is a tradition throughout history of blaming victims of violent crimes, particularly women. In addition, she has been socialized to believe that she holds the relationship together. To abandon such a responsibility is to shirk one's assigned role. Significant others in her life often reinforce this guilt. Friends, family, clergy and counselors are often cited as encouraging her to "stay and try to work it out" or admonishing "you promised for better or for worse."

Caring

Women who have been abused have not experience their partners as only abusive. They have also experiences love, kindness and gentleness of their partners. Sometimes this is a reflection of the "honeymoon" cycle in an abusive pattern. It may represent an effort t manipulate her to stay. However, it can be another dimension of the partner's personality. The abused woman genuinely does not want to lose this important facet of her life.

Caretaking

Through socialization, women are taught that their lot in life is to nurture, to accommodate others and to consider their own needs as a very low priority (if they are considered at all). Failing this, women risk the worst accusation that can be leveled against them, the defect of selfishness. Women are taught not only to tolerate, but to expect and accommodate imperfection in others and that nurturance and caring has the power to change others. An integral dynamic of the abuse in intimate relationships is the degree to which the partner being abused must anticipate the abusing partner's needs, moods and expectations. In order to survive, a woman who is being abused must work so hard to anticipate her abusive partner that it is dangerous to stop long enough to assess her own needs, moods and expectations. In time, she can reach the point where she no longer recognizes her own needs.

Low Self-Esteem

Even if a woman comes into a relationship with her self-esteem intact, the dynamics of abuse are such that each battering incident diminishes how she values herself. It takes a significant amount of self-esteem for anyone to make a major life change, such as leaving a relationship.

Lack of Support

Looking at all of the messages women have received about a woman's role in life, it's not hard to imagine that a woman would have trouble finding support for a decision to leave a relationship. Added to this are the isolation which occurs as a function of the battering and the institutionalization of blaming, discrediting, discounting and disbelieving women, who are victims of violence. Further, the more successful the façade of her partner, the greater the discredit and disbelief given to the abused woman.

Economic Limitations

Even after years of lobbying and consciousness-raising, women still make \$.59 to every dollar that men make. It is difficult, if not impossible, to make ends meet without the income of a second adult. If a woman had chosen not to work outside the home while in the relationship, or if her partner's abuse or threats of abuse prevented outside work, the woman will find it difficult to obtain sufficient work to support herself. Moreover, she is not psychologically at her best to land a job. Stigmas are still attached to receiving public assistance and it is often a lengthy and time-consuming process offering little more than bare substance.

Erosion of Definitions

Many of us have self-righteously or fearfully remarked, "Well is a partner of mine ever hit me, I'd be gone so fast..." We don't realize that many abused women said the very same thing. Understanding what is defined as abuse, as well as how abuse occurs in a relationship, is crucial to understanding the subtlety of its beginnings and of its pervasive and pernicious characteristic.

It is important to note here that "abuse" is not limited to the most concrete and obvious abuses nor are these necessarily the most damaging. Many of us are either accustomed to abuses or don't believe that it can happen to us. We often minimize these acts or write off certain behaviors.

Most women have learned that women typically get to control very little. Thus, it may take only minimal effort to set the stage to control a woman's behavior. Wanting to control the behavior of another often intensifies as early effort to do so are successful. As the abused partner grows accustomed to each violation, additional and more extreme effort is required to maintain control.

Getting used to controlling or limiting behaviors, having limits ignored, put-downs, insults, intrusions etc., often make other abuses seem less extreme than they may have seemed at one time. As the norm becomes abuse, the line between it and non-abusive behavior is eroded. Considerable damage has already been done. This may all occur prior to or without "clear-cut" evidence of violence (such as hitting).

Learned Helplessness

This refers to a specific and widely accepted concept developed by M. Seligman from research with animals. Briefly, it was found that when placed in a situation which involves an aversive stimulus not under the subject's control, the subject will respond in a predictable fashion. Initially, the subject exhibits new avoidance behaviors randomly, progressing to increasingly more desperate behaviors. Ultimately, the subject stops any avoidance behavior and show signs of clinical depression. At this point, subjects were found unable to take action to protect themselves, even then the means to do so were made available to them. The subjects generalized this response to other situations. Seligman observed that subjects needed assistance and numerous trials to relearn self-preservation, an instinct that previously had come naturally to them. It has been suggested and confirmed that "learned helplessness" is seen paralleled in women's experience, especially abused women's.