



WHY DO WOMEN STAY IN VIOLENT RELATIONSHIPS?

Simply asking the question “Why do women stay in violent relationships?” is blaming the victim. People don’t seem to ask nearly as often, “Why do men batter?”, a question which places the blame with the perpetrator. It is easy to blame the victims in battering relationships. Often, those outside the relationship will think that if she really wants to leave, she can. However, abuse is never the victim’s fault, and there are often many psychological issues affecting abused women and their ability to leave an abusive relationship.

When a victim is caught in the cycle of violence, she is experiencing many emotions. During the violent stage, she is often afraid of her partner. She knows better than anyone else what that person will do to her or her children if she tries to leave. Once the violence is over and the couple is in that honeymoon phase, the victim may feel renewed love toward the batterer. The batterer is on his best behavior and the victim is reminded of all the qualities in him that she loves. During the tension building stage, the victim often grasps on to a sense of hope. More than anything, she wants things to change. She wants him to mean what he says – this time. Adding to the love, hope and fear, battered women often experience shame, embarrassment and isolation.

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence outlines three major categories for why women stay in abusive relationships:

Lack of Resources

- Most women have at least one dependent child.
- Many women are not employed outside of the home.
- Many women have no property that is solely theirs.
- Some women lack access to cash or bank accounts.
- Women who leave fear being charged with desertion, and losing children and joint assets.
- A woman may face a decline in living standards for herself and her children.

Institutional Responses

- Clergy and secular counselors are often trained to see only the goal of “saving” the marriage at all costs, rather than the goal of stopping the violence.
- Police officers often treat violence as a domestic “dispute,” instead of a crime where one person is physically attacking another person.
- Police may try to dissuade women from filing charges.
- Prosecutors are often reluctant to prosecute cases, and judges rarely levy the maximum sentence upon convicted abusers. Probation or a fine is much more common.



- Despite the issuing of a restraining order, there is little to prevent a released abuser from returning and repeating the assault.
- Despite greater public awareness and the increased availability of housing for women fleeing violent partners, there are not enough shelters to keep women safe.

Traditional Ideology

- Many women do not believe divorce is a viable alternative.
- Many women believe that a single parent family is unacceptable, and that even a violent father is better than no father at all.
- Many women are socialized to believe that they are responsible for making their marriage work. Failure to maintain the marriage equals failure as a woman.
- Many women become isolated from friends and families, either by the jealous and possessive abuser, or to hide signs of the abuse from the outside world. The isolation contributes to a sense that there is nowhere to turn.
- Many women rationalize their abuser's behavior by blaming stress, alcohol, problems at work, unemployment or other factors.
- Many women are taught that their identity and worth are contingent upon getting and keeping a man.

The abuser rarely beats the woman all the time. During the non-violent phases, he may fulfill the woman's dream of romantic love. She believes that he is basically a "good man." If she believes that she should hold onto a "good man," this reinforces her decision to stay. She may also rationalize that her abuser is basically good until something bad happens to him and he has to "let off steam."