



Factors That Can Influence the Decision to Leave or Stay in an Abusive Relationship (Why Does She Stay?)

“Why Does She Stay?” This is a commonly asked question by friends, family, neighbors and the community in general when it is discovered that a woman is in an abusive relationship. Ironically, the question, "Why doesn't the abuser stop abusing?" rarely gets asked. In asking "why do women stay," it is important to recognize that the question itself arises out of a lack of understanding of the complexities and dangers of intimate partner abuse. At another level, it is a question that ultimately puts responsibility for the abuse and ending it, upon the woman. The first step in supporting someone who is being abused is to examine the barriers she faces in making the choice to leave, and to provide her with support and information. The challenge is acknowledging why it is so difficult for women to live free of violence and examine ways in which community institutions and cultural values have the ability to perpetuate or to end abuse.

Fear of Retaliation

The most dangerous time in an abusive relationship is when a victim is in the process of leaving. Victims know their partners best. If their partner has threatened to commit suicide if they leave or has threatened to harm them or their family if they leave, they are in a lethal situation. Many women stay in the relationship for fear of harm to themselves, their children, family, property, pets, or anyone who has helped her.

Economic Dependence

Control over finances and financial decisions are very common abusive tactics. Many women may not have bank accounts in their name or access to the checkbooks, access to their own salary if they are allowed to work, poor credit, or are put on an allowance that only their partner can give them.

Isolation

The majority of victims of abuse have been isolated from their family, friends, faith community, employment, recreational activities, etc. Isolation is one of the very first tactics an abuser uses. The more she is isolated the less help she will receive in leaving the situation and the more she is dependent on her abuser. She may feel very isolated emotionally, thinking that there is no one who would understand what is happening. She may feel that she has no place to go or be unaware of resources. Even if a woman is attending church, she can still be isolated. Some women are only allowed to leave the house to go to places of worship and must come right back. Also, many women are able to escape for specific amounts of time during the day while their partners are at work.

Promises of Change

It is very common for the abuser to make amends or to make promises that “things will change” or that they will get better. The victim wants to believe that they will go to counseling, that he will get treatment, or that he will talk to his pastor. She wants to believe that he is the charming guy she met and that something just went wrong that can be fixed. She may spend years hoping that he will change while no effort is being made.

Societal Attitudes

The victim may believe some gender-role stereotypes, e.g., that the man is the head of the house, the breadwinner and ruler overall, that the woman is responsible for family happiness, that low regard for woman is okay, she may view abuse as “normal”, especially if it was present in her childhood; she may believe that family matters are “private” or that we need to “stay together for the sake of the kids.” In her community she may feel condemned for getting a divorce or wanting separation.

Self-Blame

A victim may believe that the abuse is her fault. That maybe if she cleaned the kitchen more often, made his favorite meals every night, or catered to him more, that the abuse would stop. She may feel like a failure as a wife and mother. The abuser and society often reinforce this misplaced blame.

Public Unawareness

Police, doctors, religious personnel may not respond to her needs and to cues she may give, telling her she needs to be a better wife, that she should change or work on “her stuff.” Doctors may prescribe tranquilizers, the survivor may be labeled “sick” or “mentally ill”; many people don’t want to get involved.