Why Leaving is Complicated: Understanding Relational Entrapment

When someone is in an abusive relationship, staying or leaving is rarely a simple choice. It is driven by psychological adaptations to trauma, cognitive survival strategies, and severe external barriers.

What It Looks Like	Mechanism	The Psychological Reality
Loving someone who is causing harm	Traumatic Bonding & Interdependence	Cycles of harm mixed with warmth create powerful emotional bonds; heavy investment keeps commitment high. (Dutton & Painter, 1993; Rhatigan & Axsom, 2006)
Making excuses for bad behavior	Cognitive Dissonance Reduction	Facing the reality is overwhelming; survivors cope by downplaying abuse and blaming outside factors. (Goodfriend & Arriaga, 2018)
Focusing on good times over bad	Betrayal Blindness	When dependent on a partner for safety, the brain adaptively dampens awareness of threatening memories to protect the bond. (Freyd et al., 2007)
Constantly second-guessing yourself	Gaslighting & Coercive Control	Abusers systematically twist reality, deny events, and accuse the partner of "overreacting," destroying self-trust. (Sweet, 2019)
Believing apologies over patterns	The "Hope of Change" Trap	Post-incident apologies and calm periods restore transient hope, leading victims to focus on promises. (Dziewa & Glowacz, 2022; Goodfriend & Arriaga, 2018)
Feeling guilty for thinking about leaving	Internalized Blame & Shame	Abusers manipulate fault, training partners to see self-protection as cruel, selfish, or disloyal. (Matlow & DePrince, 2015; Sweet, 2019)
Waiting for the person they used to be	Identity Decoupling	Survivors separate the abusive behavior from who they believe the partner "truly" is deep down, treating harm as a temporary phase. (Dziewa & Glowacz, 2022)
Feeling paralyzed	Exit Inertia & Ambivalence	Leaving is a non-linear process involving back-and-forth stages where emotional attachment conflicts with fear. (Di Basilio et al., 2022; Edwards et al., 2015)
Reaching a turning point	Cognitive Shift & Risk Appraisal	Sustainable recovery begins when energy moves from wishing for change to objectively recognizing the pattern and prioritizing safety and well-being. (Dziewa & Glowacz, 2022; Matlow & DePrince, 2015)

The Hidden Physical & Structural Reality

Isolation & Household Control

Abusers often cut off the household by preventing visitors and barring contact with family to prevent reality checks.

(Katz, 2016; Sweet, 2019)

Material Barriers

Lacking money, independent housing, legal protection, or fearing the loss of children can make departure feel practically impossible.

(Edwards et al., 2015; Matlow & DePrince, 2015; Muñoz-Rivas et al., 2024)

Separation Violence

Leaving is the most dangerous time; severe retaliation spikes when a partner loses control, making hesitation a survival tactic.

(Campbell et al., 2003; Di Basilio et al., 2022)

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