

The Most Misunderstood Decision a Survivor Can Make

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There is a phrase I have heard countless times throughout my career:

"Why doesn't she just leave?"

Sometimes it is asked out of frustration. Sometimes out of confusion. Sometimes by people who genuinely care and cannot understand why someone would remain in a relationship that is causing harm.

Over time, our language has become more informed, and many people no longer ask why someone doesn't leave. Instead, we hear phrases like: *"They're not ready."*

While often well-intentioned, I believe this language can still miss something important.

Because many survivors are not staying because they are resistant to change. They are staying because they are making strategic decisions in circumstances most of us hope we never have to face.

Leaving is often portrayed as a single event. In reality, it is frequently a process that unfolds over months or years. It is rarely as simple as packing a bag and walking out the door. Survivors may be weighing the safety of their children, housing availability, financial stability, immigration concerns, community connections, cultural expectations, family relationships, legal risks, and the possibility that leaving could actually increase danger in the short term.

In many cases, survivors understand the risks better than anyone around them.

They know when violence tends to escalate. They know what behaviours trigger retaliation. They know how their partner responds to loss of control. They know what resources are available ... and what resources are not.

What may look like hesitation from the outside is often careful risk assessment on the inside.

This is one of the reasons the question should not be, *"Why doesn't she leave?"*.

The better question is: **"What is making it difficult or unsafe to leave right now?"**

That shift matters because it moves us away from judging decisions and toward understanding circumstances.

It also challenges the assumption that safety can only be achieved through separation.

For some survivors, leaving immediately may be the safest option. For others, it may not be.

A survivor may stay while quietly gathering documents, saving money, securing housing, building a support network, consulting a lawyer, documenting abuse, or creating a safety plan.

These actions are not signs of resistance. They are signs of preparation.

They are strategy.

When we view staying as a failure to act, we risk overlooking the strength, planning, and survival skills that many survivors are using every day. We may unintentionally communicate that there is only one "right" decision, when in reality safety planning must be individualized and responsive to each person's circumstances.

As professionals, advocates, family members, and friends, our role is not to decide when someone should leave. Our role is to help create the conditions that make safety possible.

That means reducing barriers.

It means providing information without pressure.

It means supporting autonomy while remaining available.

It means recognizing that survivors are often experts in their own risk.

Most importantly, it means understanding that staying and planning can coexist.

A survivor can want safety and still stay.

A survivor can recognize harm and still stay.

A survivor can be preparing to leave and still stay.

These realities are not contradictions. They are reflections of the complex decisions people make when navigating danger.

Perhaps it is time we retire the assumption that staying means someone is not ready.

Because often, what looks like resistance is actually strategy.

And when we recognize that, we move closer to the kind of survivor-centred support that respects both safety and self-determination.