

# Clear Thinking About Partner Abuse

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Partner abuse can be a muddy issue for the two people directly involved, concerned friends and relatives, and even helping professionals. What defines an abusive relationship? What distinguishes it from an up-and-down, stormy, or just plain bad relationship? And, if someone feels abused or threatened by their romantic partner, how do they decide whether to stay or to go?

People mistreat their loved ones for a variety of reasons, including bad moods, poor coping, unremitting stress, health issues that cause chronic pain, and disagreements that get out of hand. Hopefully these are infrequent or situational occurrences, acknowledged and regretted once the indecorous partner realizes their mistake. However, there are some people who are disposed to mistreat others on a more frequent or continual basis. This can be due to an addiction, a deeply ingrained personality problem, or a psychiatric condition that impairs emotional and behavioral regulation, e.g., getting enraged over small things.

In addition to mood and thought disorders which can make people irrational, there are trauma-based responses that trigger verbal or physical aggression in the face of any perceived (interpersonal) threat, i.e., rejection, humiliation, abandonment. Determining the cause of someone's abusive behavior can be difficult, especially if they're disowning responsibility and failing to seek needed professional help. However, there are some signs and indicators which can help guide decision-making in these painful situations.

Abusive partners with apparent substance abuse or mental health problems are unlikely to change unless they make a serious commitment to addressing the underlying issues. If they have the motivation and insight to do so and take ownership of their abusive tendencies including controlling behavior, there is a reasonable possibility that the significant relationship can be salvaged. The victim will know that such a partner is sincerely trying if they make sustained efforts to get help, and support and encourage any steps taken to ensure physical/psychological safety. Someone who has been aggressive or threatening should perfectly understand why their partner might decide to separate and seriously consider dissolving the union. Such a separation/divorce should be structured to minimize stress and disruption for the victim and any children involved.

Abusers with personality disorders, whether or not they have other psychiatric or substance abuse issues, tend to be much less workable. Two personality patterns which account for a lot of abusive behavior are narcissistic (entitled, self-centered, lacking in empathy) and antisocial (like narcissistic with a no-conscience disregard for rules/norms/the rights of others). Some defining characteristics of abusive people with serious characterological problems are:

- extremely controlling behavior – acting like they own you, limiting your freedom and autonomy, interfering with other relationships and activities, possibly sabotaging your job or other avenues of independence (this is called COERCIVE CONTROL domestic abuse and such perpetrators rarely change)

- indifference or obliviousness to the needs and feelings of others, and the impact of their own decisions and behavior; no genuine remorse when they hurt others – only upset if there are negative consequences like losing a relationship or a job and then cast self as a victim
- cruel and sadistic tendencies – going after you where you're most vulnerable, sexual and/or social humiliation, appearing to take satisfaction in your pain and distress if you resist their dominance and control
- either a rageful or a self-justifying response to being confronted about their abusive behavior; and a related talent for portraying themselves as the victim.

Many narcissistic and anti-social people are charming and intelligent, and cultivate the image of an ideal dating partner or spouse. Sometimes even friends/families of the victim and helping professionals are taken in, and assume that the reports of mistreatment are exaggerated (when usually they are minimized by the victim). They might keep encouraging the victim to give the abuser another chance, and even create doubt about whether they are provoking the abusive behavior.

There are some abusive behaviors which call for immediate police and/or domestic violence program intervention. These include:

- sexual abuse or assaults on the adult victim or any children in the home; unauthorized sharing of sexually graphic images (“revenge porn”)
- physical assaults on children including harsh, inappropriate discipline
- serious or repeated physical assaults on the partner like pushing, physical restraint or blocking so you can't leave
- dangerous physical assaults – choking, pushing down a flight of stairs, attempts to run down with car; or brandishing weapons
- endangering behavior such as extremely reckless driving, drugging the partner to gain sexual compliance, giving children alcohol or drugs
- abuse of family pets or other animals
- any threat to kill the victim and/or her children, even if made in an offhand or joking manner.

Someone who does any of the above is not safe to be with, period. Even if they apologize and send you flowers afterward... or act like nothing happened...or claim they have trust issues because their last wife cheated... blame their bad childhood, etc.

The conventional wisdom is the people stay in abusive relationships because – in addition to having low self-esteem – they are in love with the person who mistreats them. But while it's natural to feel attached to one's partner and afraid of losing a significant relationship, often the love has gone long before the victim considers seeking help.... In these cases, the victim has become a psychological hostage, paralyzed by some combination of unhealthy dependency, fear and intimidation, guilt, and manipulation. Even if the love is still there, victims can pay a heavy price in “bargaining” to keep an unsafe relationship in which they've already invested too much.... There are excellent community-based domestic violence programs that can help

victims plan a safe exit strategy for themselves and their children. These services are typically free and confidential.

In less dire situations, professional counselors and therapists can have a valuable role in helping victims understand the dynamics of abusive relationships and make well-considered decisions about whether to stay or go. It should be noted, however, that some counselors and clergy have a bias toward keeping married couples or those with children together. They might equate abusive relationships with the average unhappy marriage which might be improved with better communication, and promote couples' counseling as a solution.

This is falling down on the job, as victims have a crucial need for validation in the face of overwhelming (and sometimes dangerous) pressure from their partners to "give them another chance." A responsible counselor provides reality checks about the seriousness of the alleged abuse, the victim's non-negotiable needs for safety and respect, and various indicators regarding an abuser's willingness and ability to change. This type of work needs to take place in individual counseling or psychotherapy, not in couples' sessions which have an implicit goal of keeping the marriage or relationship together.

If and when the abusive partner makes meaningful changes, and the victim/survivor makes a genuinely free decision to reconcile, there will be plenty of time for couples' work. In these admittedly rare situations, it might be possible to develop a new relationship characterized by safety, trust, and mutual respect. More often, the survivor will need to find a new path via enhanced self-care and self-protection, and cultivation of a genuinely helpful support system.

**US National Domestic Violence Hotline (24 hours)**

**1-800-799-SAFE (7233)**

**TTY 1-800-787-3224**

**[Domestic Violence Support | The National Domestic Violence Hotline \(thehotline.org\)](https://www.thehotline.org/)**