

# Fear

*Tiny little feet scamper across the linoleum, moving awkwardly between 'mama' and 'dada'. What should be a joyous moment registers only as fear and regret as the tot's mother quickly realizes that her daughter's first steps in life are taken in an attempt to block her mother from the abuser. The moment is etched in the mother's memory and on her heart. "How could I do that to my baby?" she wonders as she holds the youngster. Regrouping emotionally from both the abuser's blows and her child's seemingly brave yet dangerous reaction, she begins to gather belongings. Sure he's gone off to work, she leaves for The Shelter.*

Domestic violence affects each of us. It's a child too young to 'understand' who instinctually steps between her caring mother and her abusive father; a fun-loving coworker who makes excuses for not joining in 'girl's night out'; your daughter's best friend wearing long sleeves all year to hide the bruises on her arms.

According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, one in every four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime. Some will immediately walk away; others will speak-up; more will try to make it work; some will eventually leave. Some will stay with their abusers until the end of their lives (either by natural causes or at the hand of their abuser). It takes an average of seven attempts before a victim actually leaves her abuser. As we've discussed, this departing time is actually one of the most dangerous times for a victim as the abuser works to reestablish control. Typically, violence escalates; threats/torture of pets, children and family members can occur; and in a final act of power and control, some victims are murdered. In fact, according to one study noted by McGee, "Nearly 1/4 of the women killed by their male partners were separated or divorced from the men who killed them. 28.6% of the women were attempting to end the relationship when they were killed."

Victims may stay with their abuser rather than risk the loss of a partner who 'is a good provider' or a 'good father' or deal with potential risks of being stalked, found and punished for leaving. In an effort to gain control over their lives, these women may reach out for counseling. In inexperienced hands, a victim may find herself in marital counseling with her abuser where the abuse cannot be addressed due to power and control issues that present in sessions. In other instances the abuser is referred for anger management which, as McGee details, "bolsters the woman's hope that the relationship can be salvaged, and she may stay or return. If he can be cured, she reasons (and her reasoning is supported by the therapist who is doing the counseling, who she sees as the expert), then the violence will end and their relationship can resume." Unfortunately, anger management is something abusers are experts at, controlling this emotion so well that coworkers, family and friends are often unaware of the verbal, emotional, psychological, financial, sexual and/or physical abuse happening behind closed doors.

Counselors inexperienced in domestic violence may "unwittingly keep a woman in a violent relationship by fostering erroneous beliefs in the positive outcomes of therapy, anger management or specialized batterers intervention programs," continues McGee. It's the abuser's ability to be romantic, charming and sensitive at the 'right' times that keeps hope alive for his victim. These positive behaviors, coupled with repeated claims that he will change, keep her in the abusive relationship. Only by receiving accurate and honest information can she make the safest choice for her and her children. This is why it's vital to raise awareness about domestic violence; bring attention to some of the varied reasons why women stay in abusive relationships; and educate the community about The Shelter's life-saving programs and services. When it comes to breaking the cycle of abuse, knowledge and empowerment save lives.



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# Why Doesn't He Leave?

*If he hit you on the first date, chances are you would never go out with him again.*

This was the opening line of this document exploring the varied reasons why some domestic violence victims stay with their abusers. We began the piece by explaining that the true experts in this field are the victims; that domestic violence doesn't discriminate; and that domestic violence can be emotional, physical, psychological, financial, sexual or a combination of these abuses. It's worth noting again that abuse is never acceptable. The victim is never to blame.

Early on I also noted that there were two basic reasons why the premise *Why Does She Stay?* was incorrect with the first being that many victims do leave their abusers. The second relates to an underlying conditioning that, perhaps unknowingly, leads us to focus on victims of abuse rather than their perpetrators.

"The questions we should be asking are: Why do assailants terrorize and torture their partners? Why is it that the vast majority of batterers are men and the vast majority of survivors are women? Why does the community allow battering to continue," notes McGee. These questions ask us to challenge social conditioning and gender norms; revolutionize our thinking. They force us to shift from placing responsibility on the victim and excusing the batterer, to looking at the perpetrator and the ways society "condones, supports and gives permission for battering." Too often our misguided thinking leads us to believe the victim has done something to 'deserve' the abuse, or has something 'wrong' with her that results in being abused (a myth the abuser perpetuates); that somehow if she changes or leaves, he would stop. Unfortunately, this is not the case. As discussed, this widely-held (albeit oftentimes covert) belief keeps victims trapped in deadly relationships. Believing "If she really wanted to leave, she would just go," or "How bad can it be, she's staying?" not only dismisses the severity of the violence, but perpetuates the cycle of abuse.

As McGee explains, "We overlook the environmental barriers that prevent women from leaving, ignore how the batterer is trapping her, and too often focus on psychological 'characteristics' of survivors instead." This document was put together precisely for this reason... to help raise our consciousness to a new level of understanding about the cycle of abuse.

Asking "Why Does He Batter?" begins the paradigm shift and, as McGee details, leads to more questions:

- How do so many women overcome the incredible obstacles they face to find safety and nonviolent relationships?
- When, why and how do women leave?
- How can we make it safer for victims to leave (since women are usually murdered after they leave their abusers)?
- What specific aspects of counseling and support methods do victims find most and least useful?
- What can we do to ensure we're reaching all survivors?
- How can we mobilize our communities to not only support survivors but also break the cycle of abuse so that we prevent violence?
- "And by the way, why doesn't he leave?"

The Shelter is working to prevent abuse before it begins, protect victims and prevail over violence in our homes, schools, businesses, neighborhoods and communities.

We now call on you to continue your support of victims of domestic violence by sharing what you've learned about abuse with those you care about and by always believing/supporting a victim who's courageous enough to share her story with you. We ask that you continue questioning your core beliefs about gender roles, socialization and stereotypes because only by working together can we break the cycle of abuse.

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# Why Does She Stay?

The Shelter for Abused Women & Children's six-part series *Why Does She Stay* explores some of the reasons why some domestic violence victims stay in abusive relationships. The series originally appeared in the *Naples Daily News*. We present it here to share the message that ending a violent relationship is not as simple as just as walking out the door.

## Reality

*If he hit you on the first date, chances are you would never go out with him again.*

*But, he waits until you are in-love with him. Until he knows you, finds your weaknesses and isolates you from family and friends. It likely starts out with something that seems innocuous. "She'll have the steak and potatoes" when you're out to dinner. You think "How romantic, he's ordering for me." Before long, the behaviors become more controlling – you're not allowed to answer the phone; you can't call family or friends; or you're at work and he calls repeatedly to 'check-on you'.*

I was asked to write a six-part series answering the question *Why Does She Stay?* regarding domestic violence victims remaining with their abusers. Let me begin by stating some facts that I've learned while working at The Shelter for Abused Women & Children, Collier County's only certified domestic violence center. First, the real experts in domestic violence are the women, children and men we serve. They know first-hand what it's like when the person you are supposed to trust most in this world becomes the person you can trust the least. Second, although physical abuse is the most commonly recognized form of domestic violence, it's not the only type of control used against victims – abuse can be verbal, financial, emotional, sexual, psychological, or a combination of these abuses. Third, intimate partner abuse doesn't discriminate on the basis of gender, socioeconomic standing, age, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation or any other 'determining' factor. It affects all of us. Fourth, one woman is abused by an intimate partner every 15 seconds in the US. That means that one in four U.S. women will be abused at sometime in their lives.

According to Futures without Violence, 84% of spousal abuse victims and 86% of partner abuse victims are female. As a result, you'll continue to see and hear shelters using 'women' and 'children' in their names (i.e., The Shelter for Abused Women & Children), and articles will continue to reference women as the victims. Despite these generalizations, men are also victims. The Shelter, just like intimate partner abuse itself, does not discriminate – our mission is to help all victims of domestic violence, including men. Let me be clear about another point – THERE IS NEVER ANY REASON, EVER, THAT IT IS 'OK' TO ABUSE SOMEONE. THE VICTIM IS NEVER TO BLAME. Let's also be clear that our premise *Why Does She Stay?* may not be the real question we need to be asking ourselves for at least two reasons, the first being that many victims do leave. The reality is that leaving is dangerous; family, friends and coworkers need to understand there are many barriers to leaving.

In her article *20 Reasons Why She Stays: A Guide for Those Who Want to Help Battered Women*, Susan G.S. McGee states, "Batterers oftentimes escalate their violence when a woman tries to leave, shows signs of independence or has left." Research indicates that 73% of battered women seeking emergency care sustained their injuries after leaving the abuser. Forty-three percent of female intimate partner stalking victims report the stalking began after the abusive relationship had ended. Staying is also a dangerous proposition, and walking away is never as easy as 'she should just leave,' a topic we will begin addressing in the next segment of this series. For now, please remember that there are many tools in the abuser's arsenal that keep a victim in a violent relationship. We will address as many issues as possible in this series, but despite common themes, there are as many reasons for staying in an abusive relationship as there are individuals living in violence.

Finally, I didn't forget the second reason why our premise question *Why Does She Stay?* isn't completely accurate, but we'll have to wait and address that later, too.

# Love

*He walks through the door and begins to yell. He's had a bad day and says things aren't 'right' at home. Feelings swirl in your mind and emotions begin to course through your body... fear, panic, numbness. You stand silently, not sure what to say as the disagreement becomes more heated, harsh words assaulting you. "What should I do? Walk away? Take a deep breath...apologize?" Your silence only brings more anger and the onslaught begins to escalate. Verbal jabs and yelling turn to threats: "If you walk out that door, you'll be sorry." "You'll pay!" Then, he strikes you. You fall to the floor thinking how this happens every day now, and for something as simple as not having dinner done 'on-time.' You wonder how serious a grievance not having dinner ready is going to be. "Apparently, very serious because I'm being hit with a fry pan..."*

This is the life of a battered woman. The violence can be verbal, financial, emotional, psychological, sexual, or a combination of these abuses but it always degrades, demeans and becomes a form of psychological terrorism that brainwashes the victim. So, *Why Does She Stay?* The Advocates at The Shelter assist more than 3,675 un-duplicated men, women and children each year and one of the most frequently mentioned reasons for staying in the abusive relationship is so obvious that we tend to overlook it – LOVE.

Abused women stay in their violent relationships despite the pain and suffering because they love their partners. *"This is often one of the hardest phenomena for people who have not been battered to understand. However, many people have been in difficult relationships or jobs that they knew they should leave, but either couldn't, or needed time to be able to depart,"* explains Susan G.S. McGee in her article *20 Reasons Why She Stays*.

The victim struggles to reconcile how her once kind, gentle and loving partner now is the man who batters her. She loves him and wants to believe him when he says he's sorry, that the abuse will never happen again, things will be better when he... gets the promotion, the house sells, his dad's health improves, etc. Where she once thought, *"There is nothing I could have done to deserve this abuse,"* she slowly comes to not only believe her abuser, but identify with him. Just like prisoners of war and concentration camp survivors, the life of a domestic violence victim becomes so controlled that she learns to take sides with her batterer to survive (the Stockholm Syndrome).

Deprivation of sleep, food, water, medication, etc., coupled with verbal blows and physical assaults slash her self-esteem until she begins to think: *"If I just had dinner on the table at 5 p.m., he wouldn't have had to hit me."* This psychological warfare steals the victim's self-identity so that she believes what her assailant is telling her; *"You're so stupid and crazy, no one will ever believe you"; "If you ever leave, I will find and kill you, your family, kids and pets."* He capitalizes on his power and feeds her false information to keep her under his control; *"You're family doesn't care, they think you're as stupid as I know you are!"* Or, he uses threats and extortion to keep her in-line; *"Go ahead, leave – that's abandonment and the courts will never let you see your kids again!"*

One of the keys to her empowerment and freedom is finding a source of factual information (employers, loved ones, [www.naplesshelter.org](http://www.naplesshelter.org)). Without someone to believe her, provide accurate information and help her gain the courage to file charges and protect herself, she can remain trapped within the abusive relationship. As McGee explains, *"When no one believes a battered woman, when her assailant isn't arrested, when she is criticized and scrutinized, when he gets custody of the children, and when he tracks her down and tries to kill her, she believes what he says. Why? Because his predictions too often turn out to be true."*

# Trapped

*No phone. No radio. No TV. Inside your dimly lit bedroom your solace is reading the Bible. You don't leave; not even to use the bathroom. It's too dangerous 'out there' with the drugs, alcohol and partying. Fearful of your adult children and their friends, you gather all the strength your 88-year old body can muster and shove the dresser in front of the door. You wait for them to leave or fall asleep; then venture out. Access to the house doesn't provide any relief – all the food is locked-up in your son's bedroom. For three days you and your dogs survive on one can of ham until a friend sees you and invites you to dinner. Instead of dining out, you find hope and safety at The Shelter. You sit and wonder, "How can these be the same children I spent a lifetime nurturing and protecting?"*

Abuse by an intimate partner isn't always obvious or what we typically think of as 'abuse'. It takes many forms – verbal, financial, emotional, psychological, sexual, physical or a combination of these – affects both genders, all ages and every socio-economic group. Beyond abuse by a spouse, domestic violence can also include neglect, mis- or mal-treatment by familial or professional caregivers.

According to the National Center on Elder Abuse, annually some two million Americans aged 65-years and older are injured, exploited or mistreated by someone on whom they depend for care and/or protection. This can include everything from children/caregivers asserting power of attorney over finances, healthcare decisions and lifestyle choices, to emotional torture and physical abuse. Whether abused by a partner or caregiver, victims who contact The Shelter often explain that financial constraints, especially when violence is coupled with health issues or raising children, are a major factor in staying with their batterer.

Living costs, especially in Southwest Florida, are a burden many victims don't believe they can bear alone. Finding housing, daycare and reliable transportation, as well as funds for medical care, food and other necessities, can be nearly impossible with no/poor credit, no savings and a limited or nonexistent income. As McGee explains, the potential costs of dealing with the abuse itself can be overwhelming – injunctions for protection, divorce proceedings and related attorney and court fees all add-up quickly. Too often batterers can afford a skilled attorney to help win custody of the children, or have a family member declared incompetent, while victims can't afford even basic legal representation to ensure their voices are heard. Tragically, when victims fail to speak-up or file charges against their abusers, they are often then victimized by the legal system. It's not uncommon for a victim to be incorrectly arrested on abuse charges when she is actually defending herself from her abuser's attacks. Resulting legal struggles affect child custody, power of attorney and cause additional trauma while also increasing the 'cost' of breaking free from the perpetrator.

For women with families, fear of losing custody of the children is a tool the abuser uses effectively to keep her trapped in the relationship. According to McGee, *"Some studies indicate that contrary to popular belief, the majority of the times that men contest custody, men are awarded custody."* Moreover, a mother may 'sacrifice' herself for the sake of the children, staying so that her children have a father, are able to attend better schools, live in safer neighborhoods and have financial security. When adult children become the abusers, the emotional, physical and financial trauma is no less dramatic. Parents are left to wonder what they did 'wrong' to now have to endure abuse at the hands of the very children they birthed and lovingly cared for their entire lives. In such cases, it appears there is a high price to pay for freedom. One that many victims believe they can't afford. With support from caring family, friends and the community, victims can find hope, safety and assistance through The Shelter's services, including The Brookedale Elder Abuse Response program.

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# Social Conditioning

*You pull into the driveway 30 minutes late. You're met at the door with an icy stare followed by a gruff "get ready" as your dress suit is thrown at your feet. Throughout dinner you make small talk with the other guests, being sure to hold hands so everything looks 'normal'. On the car ride home things escalate: "You're fat and ugly. A thousand dollar suit can't make you look good... People think I married an idiot!" By the time you walk into the kitchen, he's so mad he threatens to take the kids and leave you rather than dealing with someone so incompetent. You brace for another attack wondering if anyone would ever believe your husband's 'Jekyll/Hyde' personality and that your 'ideal life' is really a nightmare.*

This is the face of domestic violence. Men and women, young and aged, wealthy and poor – domestic violence does not discriminate and each victim faces an array of fears, stigmas and social conditioning that can keep him/her trapped in an abusive relationship. Since 97% of perpetrators are men we continue to use "women" and "children" when speaking about victims of intimate partner abuse. However, this in no way diminishes the issues faced by male victims.

According to McGee, many victims find themselves trapped because of what others say. *"They are told (by professionals, family, friends and the batterer) that alcohol or other drugs cause battering. They are told they are codependent, that they enable his behavior, and if they would change, then their assailants would."* She further explains that victims may stay because they believe societal stereotypes about battered women; that victims:

- Imagine, exaggerate, fabricate or initiate the violence
- Provoke or somehow are to blame for the abuse
- Come from uneducated, poor or minority backgrounds

Or what they're told about abusers having problems controlling their anger; or that stress and employment problems cause the battering.

*"If I just had been home on time he wouldn't have to..."*, *"When he gets the new job..."* and a multitude of other 'reasons' why the batterer is not at fault combine with isolationism, threats and brainwashing to make the victim feel responsible for the abuse. A victim who believes she's to blame spends a lifetime pacifying the abuser only to discover, again and again, this does not work. As she continues in this cycle, it becomes more and more difficult to escape the violence. However, domestic abuse is not about 'losing control' – abusers control their behaviors extremely well choosing the "who, what, where, when and how" of their violence. They're generally well loved by others, saving the abuse for their partner in the confines of the home.

Despite our culture's 'girl power' movement, females continue to be socialized to be caring, accommodating and passive. Too often there is a high price to pay for learning to be so 'nice'. Although we tend to believe that the "don't cry" mindset of boys' socialization leads to intimate partner abuse, according to McGee it's actually the concept of entitlement, that a partner exists solely to meet this person's needs, which feeds abuse. By educating ourselves on the signs of abuse, becoming aware of our own stereotypes, beliefs and the effects of social conditioning in our lives, we can become agents for social change.

As we begin to address violence among children, teens, adults, special populations and throughout society, we come to understand the vital role programs such as The Shelter's *Hands Are for Helping, Not Hitting; Teen Dating Violence; Women of Means; Gentle men Against Domestic Violence; Elder Abuse Response*, etc., play in breaking the cycle of abuse. By working together to create equality among the sexes, teaching children healthy ways to deal with emotions, shifting away from the 'blame the victim' mentality and, as a society, believe victims, we take the first steps to creating a community free from domestic violence.