

Why People Stay in Abusive Relationships*

Many people recognize they are being mistreated or even abused, but choose to stay in the relationship for a number of reasons. When friends or family members ask them "Why do you stay...?" they may have a hard time explaining. After all, it is never easy to end a relationship, even a hurtful one. Below are some of the common reasons people stay in unhappy or abusive relationships. If you are being mistreated, it might be helpful to look over this list and circle the reasons that might have something to do with your decision to stay.

1. **Love.** You love your partner, and there are still times when your partner is very loving.
2. **Hope.** You have many memories of happy times, and hope those times will return. Your partner may promise to change, or you may think if you do things differently, the abuse will stop.
3. **Making light of the abuse.** Your partner may deny that his or her behavior is abusive, or act like it's not such a big deal, and you want to believe this. It's very painful to admit that someone you love would hurt you, so you might try to convince yourself it's not really that bad.
4. **Blaming yourself.** Your partner might blame you for his or her abusive behavior - saying you made him or her angry, or that you did something to deserve it. A part of you may believe this.
5. **Link between love and violence.** If you grew up in a home where there was violence, or if you were ever hit by a parent and told they were doing it because they love you, you might have learned to think that love and violence go together.
6. **Hopelessness.** You may feel like you'll never be able to be happy, you'll never find a partner who treats you any better, or that all relationships include abuse.
7. **Gender roles.** If you're a woman in a relationship with a man, you may have learned from family, religion, or culture that men are supposed to be in charge, can't help being violent, or have the right to discipline their women. You may believe that women have to put up with this behavior and try to keep their men happy.
8. **Embarrassment and shame.** You may not want to admit what's going on to others because you're afraid of what they will think about you.
9. **Financial dependence.** You may depend on your partner for financial support.
10. **Lack of supportive relationships.** You may have become isolated from your friends and family. Or, family and friends may pressure you to stay with your partner.
11. **Fear.** Your partner may have threatened to hurt or kill you or someone you care about if you leave.
12. **Not wanting to be alone.** You may panic at the thought of being without your partner.
13. **Loyalty.** You may feel the right thing to do is to stick with your partner no matter what.
14. **Rescue complex.** You think you can change, fix, or heal your partner if you stay.
15. **Guilt.** Your partner may make you feel guilty about how much it would hurt him or her if you left. S/he may even threaten to commit suicide.
16. **Children.** If you have a child with your partner, you may believe it is best for the child to have two parents who are together.
17. **Dependency on drugs or alcohol.** Many people use drugs or alcohol as a way of coping with abuse, which then makes them less clear and strong and makes it more difficult to leave.

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Why People Stay in Abusive Relationships (Cont'd.)

Whatever your reasons for staying in an abusive relationship, those reasons are very real and very important to you. However, it is also important to look at both sides of the situation. Some of your reasons may be based on misunderstandings or myths, and some might be based on fear. If you are struggling with wanting to end the relationship but you can't get past one or more of your reasons for staying, it might help to consider the following statements that give 'the other side' of the argument about each of these reasons.

1. **Love.** No one can argue with the way you feel—your love is real and you can't ignore it. But loving someone doesn't always mean they are healthy for you. Ending your relationship does not mean you will automatically stop loving your partner, but with time your feelings will be less intense as you are able to look at the whole picture. It might help to focus on nurturing your love for yourself and your family or friends. It may seem impossible now, but if you end your relationship, you will someday find another boyfriend or girlfriend to love—and hopefully it will be a healthier love.
2. **Hope.** You are not the cause of the abuse, so nothing you do or change about your behavior will end the abuse. While abusers usually promise to change during the honeymoon stage, it is rare for an abuser to change while still in a relationship—usually, the only way to stop the abuse is to end the relationship.
3. **Making light of the abuse.** Abuse is a big deal. No one deserves to be abused, and physical abuse is a serious crime that can result in jail time for the abuser.
4. **Blaming yourself.** The fact is that there is nothing you can do to make another person hurt you, and no one deserves to be hurt under any circumstances. Everyone is 100% responsible for their own behavior.
5. **Link between love and violence.** Physical abuse is not about love—it's about gaining power and control. Even if violence was normal in your upbringing, the fact is that it is NOT a normal part of a healthy, loving relationship.
6. **Hopelessness.** The idea of being happy without your current partner may seem impossible now, but remember that you are a person who deserves to be treated with respect. There are many people out there who don't abuse!
7. **Gender roles.** A healthy relationship is a partnership based on equality, regardless of gender. If you checked this as a reason for staying, work with a counselor on understanding gender roles.
8. **Embarrassment and shame.** It is true that some people judge or blame people who are being abused because they are not educated about relationship abuse. You must remember that you are not the one doing something wrong, and you have nothing to be ashamed of! Counselors at domestic violence hotlines and agencies will not judge you, and can help you figure out which friends or family members you can talk to.
9. **Financial dependence.** There are ways to become more financially independent, including programs specifically set up for people who are financially trapped in abusive relationships. Your counselor can help you make a plan for financial independence.
10. **Lack of supportive relationships.** Your friends and family may be more willing than you think to help you if you want to end an abusive relationship—but, you may have to develop new supportive relationships. A good place to start is with a support group where you will meet other people who have been in abusive relationships.
11. **Fear.** If you have been threatened, it is very important to develop a safety plan with your counselor before leaving. Know there are shelters and other programs to help you get away from an abuser.
12. **Not wanting to be alone.** You are a strong person who has endured a great deal, and while the idea of being alone is scary, you can live without an abusive relationship. Developing other supportive relationships will be helpful.
13. **Loyalty.** Loyalty must be earned. Someone who is supposed to love you, but who abuses you, has betrayed you. No reasonable person should expect you to be loyal to someone who abuses you.
14. **Rescue complex.** No amount of loyalty or understanding will change your partner.
15. **Guilt.** Guilt trips are a way of manipulating you. Your partner is responsible for his or her own actions; you are only responsible for yourself. You have nothing to feel guilty about if you choose to leave an abusive relationship.
16. **Children.** The fact is, witnessing abuse is extremely psychologically damaging to children. A child is better off living with one non-violent parent than with two parents in an abusive relationship. You can work out a way for your child to see the other parent in a safe setting.
17. **Dependency on drugs and alcohol.** If you use drugs or alcohol as a way of coping with abuse, it's important to get treatment for this problem so you can make healthier decisions about your relationships.

Why Teens Stay in Abusive Relationships

One of the questions that is asked most frequently of people who are in abusive relationships, whether it's domestic violence or dating violence, is why they stay in those relationships. This can be a complicated issue, especially for teens. There is usually no single reason for a teen to stay in an abusive dating relationship, but there are many factors which can make it difficult for her/him to leave, some of which are unique to being a teenager. For example:

- The victim doesn't want to be alone. There are a lot of pressures in society to have a boyfriend or girlfriend. Another complication arises if the victim and abuser share the same group of friends. (Being alone can be scary, but living without abuse can be a much better life.)
- Teens may be reluctant to look for help. Because many teens are struggling to become independent from their parents, they may not want to confide in them when troubles arise. Sometimes, their friends may not be supportive, either, pressuring them instead to stay together with the abuser. (Confidential hotlines like RACS' are available for teens to talk things out and figure out their options.)
- A lack of experience with dating relationships may lead teens to believe that jealousy and violence are signs of love. (But, physical abuse and jealousy are not about love - they're about gaining power and control, and are not a normal part of a healthy, loving relationship.)
- The victim believes that she/he deserves no better. Gender role stereotypes can make this more of an issue for a female victim. If the victim is a female in a relationship with a male, she may have learned from family, religion, or culture that men are supposed to be in charge, can't help being violent, or have the right to discipline their women. She may believe that it's the female's role to put up with this behavior and try to keep the male happy. (But a healthy relationship is a partnership based on equality, regardless of gender.)
- The victim blames herself/himself. The abuser may blame the victim for his or her abusive behavior, saying that the victim made him/her angry, or did something to deserve the abuse. The victim may believe this. (The fact is that there is nothing a person can do to make someone else hurt them, and no one deserves to be hurt under any circumstances. Everyone is 100% responsible for their own behavior.)
- The abuser threatens to hurt himself, the victim, or others if the victim tries to end the relationship. (If the victim has been threatened, it is very important to talk to someone about developing a safety plan before leaving.)
- Many individuals may have difficulty identifying abuse when it's occurring. This is especially an issue if the teen is growing up in a home where there is violence, since this seems like "normal" behavior to him/her.
- The relationship has damaged the victim's self-esteem. This usually has already occurred by the time the abuse starts.

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