

## Why Does He Choose to Abuse?

The first question faced by victims of abuse is often: *Am I in an abusive relationship?* And when this question has been answered, it stirs up a second question of equal importance: *Is the abuse my fault?*

We understand you may wonder if things might improve if only you were a bit more compliant, or if you had a stronger backbone, or maybe if you simply stayed out of his way. But research tells another story, and it is one you need to know.

Research on domestic violence reveals that a woman's behavior actually has no bearing on the abuse. In fact, all of the factors that lead to increased or decreased violence are characteristics of the abuser, not the victim. Psychologists Neil Jacobson and John Gottman say it plainly: "There was nothing battered women could do to stop the abuse except get out of the relationship."<sup>1</sup>

Ultimately, abusive men do not abuse because of what their partners do or do not do; they abuse because of complex internal pathologies beyond your control or responsibility.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, and as we have said before, *it is not your fault.*

The abuser is the only one to blame for his abuse. Of course, he does not want you to see it this way. As we have discussed, men who abuse share some common characteristics—and one of these characteristics is to blame-shift. They want you to believe that you are at fault for the abuse you are receiving. But this is not true.

Focusing on your abuser's behavior—rather than your response to his behavior—is crucial for you to get past any feelings of guilt for what has happened to you. The question of "Why don't you leave?" is an important one, but is often used to put the responsibility on you—

the one experiencing abuse. Our hope is that people will instead begin asking “Why does he choose to abuse?”

### ABUSIVE MEN CHOOSE TO ABUSE

While characteristics vary from person to person, all abusers share one thing in common: they choose to abuse deliberately.

They may blame their behavior on you, an abusive childhood, stress, alcohol problems, their cultural background, financial problems, or their personalities.

Others aid in this false claim by assuming violence and abuse only happen because the abuser isn’t able to control his behavior. Others still believe abusers do what they do because they were abused as a child, or that their behavior is dictated by mental illness. Certainly childhood issues, alcohol, drugs, mental, and other health problems may be factors of domestic abuse, but they are not the cause.

The truth is, the only reason an abuser abuses is because he chooses to. Contrary to what some believe, abusers *are* able to control their behavior—they do it all the time. Just look at how they behave when they are not around their victims.

The flip side of this is that if abusers can indeed control their actions, we believe that perpetrators can also choose to behave respectfully toward others. The bottom line is, whether he chooses to abuse or to respect, the responsibility for his choice is his alone. And yet, it is not worth risking your safety to stay around and find out what he will choose.

We know that certain factors intensify an abuser’s desire to abuse, but none of those factors cause abuse. Abusers abuse for one reason: because they want to. Yet there are no acceptable reasons for a partner to abuse another in an intimate relationship.

Here’s why we believe he’s in control of what he’s doing. Have you ever seen him suddenly change his behavior in the middle of an abusive episode? Have you noticed that he does not abuse others—only you or your children? More than that, an abuser often makes strategic

decisions about the type and amount of abuse. Perpetrators have rules about how far they will go. They are selective about where they will inflict injury on a victim's body—for example, where the bruises will not be seen in public. Many abusers are also excellent at concealing their violent tendencies, putting on a charming face in public and waiting to unleash their anger and abuse only in the privacy of their own home. All of this shows abusers are quite purposeful about how and where they choose to abuse.

So if abuse is always his fault, why do women stay?

### WHY SOME ABUSED WOMEN STAY

There are lots of reasons why a person might choose to stay in an abusive relationship. Staying doesn't mean that you like the abuse or that it cannot be "that bad." No matter why you stay, the abuse is never your fault. We know that the deck is stacked against you when confronted with leaving or not. There is a very real fear of retaliation or even death if you leave, but as we will talk about later, we believe leaving is a risk well worth taking.

While we urge you to leave as soon as possible, we know there are a variety of factors why you might be staying with an abuser or have not yet left. Combining the insights of theology, sociology, and therapy, Catherine Clark Kroeger, Nancy Nason-Clark, and Helene L. Conway offer numerous reasons why women do not leave or end a violent relationship:<sup>3</sup>

- Fear is the number one reason women do not leave abusive husbands and violent homes. An abused woman fears for her future, fears further violence, and fears for the lives of her children. Fear permeates her life and is often experienced as a paralyzing terror, ruling her day and destroying her sleep through nightmares.
- Finances—economic dependency—keep many women from perceiving that there are options besides life with their violent

partner. A woman's lack of personal or economic resources, coupled with the fact that she might never have been employed, means she cannot see the alternatives.

- The fantasy of change, or the hope that someday the violence will cease, keeps many women with violent husbands for years or for a lifetime.
- Afraid that no one will believe them. Sometimes victims stay because they are afraid that no one will believe them. Often an abuser will use this as a threat to keep the victim in the relationship.
- Low self-esteem. Experiencing abuse can erode a person's self-esteem. They may find it difficult to make decisions or think clearly during this time.
- Mixed feelings. The victim may have mixed feelings for the abuser. They may be torn between the abuser's "good qualities" and wanting the abuse to end.
- Religious or cultural beliefs can affect their acceptance of abuse. The victim's religion or culture may condone some forms of relationship violence.
- Religious beliefs sometimes cause women to feel that God does not permit them to leave, that marriage is forever, that this is their cross to bear, or that perpetual forgiveness of their husband for his repeated behavior is God's expectation. Religious women are especially likely to cling to the belief that their violent husband wants to and will change his behavior. Here it is critical that the victim seek out wise counsel from a trained pastor and counselor to help her navigate these issues.
- Cultural pressures may keep a victim from leaving her abuser. The victim may feel pressure from family, friends, and/or society to stay in the relationship and not give up, even if their partner is abusive.
- Children in the picture can often cause a victim to reconsider leaving when she weighs the emotional, financial, and educa-

tional consequences of taking the children away from their father. A mother may feel that her children are better off at home especially if the abuser is not directly violent to the children.

- Other emotions, such as shame of a failed relationship or embarrassment at the intimate nature of her horrors, may make a victim reluctant to leave since she knows she will have to explain her reasons for leaving to others.
- The abuser may have made threats to the victim about leaving. Threats can range from physical threats to the victim or someone the victim cares about, to suicide, and even blackmail. The victim may feel trapped.
- The victim may have tried to break up with the abuser in the past only to be abused with more intensity or stalked by him.

### THE RESISTANCE OF ABUSED WOMEN

Those who have been abused are often actively resisting their abusers, but all too often, their resistance goes unnoticed by outsiders. Family and friends may assume that victims have not done enough to protect themselves and have created their own misfortunes. Also, victims tend not to talk about their experiences of abuse to stay safer from the perpetrator, and to avoid the negative judgments of others. Often family, friends, and professionals do not hear the full story of how much victims have suffered or how much they have resisted the abuse. If you've been abused and have resisted your abuser, sadly, you're likely to have experienced at least some of what is mentioned above. This experience is often painful and embarrassing.

You may experience messages from others that leave you feeling shameful and disheartened. Acquaintances may imply that you're "damaged" or even "responsible" for the abuse. Well-meaning family and friends may feel there is something wrong with you for having picked an abuser to marry, or believe you are so damaged that you are likely going to pick another abuser.

Too often women who resist abuse are seen to be at fault when they resist or stand up to the abuser. However, if you've resisted your abuser, you're showing that you've maintained something of your humanity and self-esteem in the face of horrendous abuse. If this is you, you should be supported, celebrated, assisted, and encouraged—not blamed, offered platitudes, asked suspicious questions, and told bad theology.

Some people make an assumption that victims passively accept violence, and lack self-esteem, assertiveness, or boundaries. But all victims do things to oppose abuse and to keep their dignity. No victim wants to be abused, and they do resist it in some way. They do stand up against, refuse to comply with, and try to stop or prevent violence, disrespect, and oppression.

Of course, abuse is dangerous territory, so usually victims resist it in small and subtle ways. Others may not even notice the resistance so they assume that victims are “passive” and “they do not do enough to stand up for themselves.” In fact, victims actively resist violence.

About this, advocates of domestic abuse explain, “It is not surprising that many victims are also confused about their partner's violent behavior, and do not understand why he does such mean and hurtful things. In our view, this ‘failure to understand’ is another way that victims resist abuse. It shows that victims know there are no acceptable reasons for abusive behavior.”<sup>4</sup>

Society may look at you in your situation and cast blame for staying. And while we do believe staying puts you at personal risk, we also believe that by even acknowledging what you are experiencing as abuse—which is without excuse—shows tremendous courage.

In appendix 2, we have listed some tips on who to talk to and how to plan a safe exit strategy. But in the meantime, we want you to know that simply by acknowledging that this abuse is a problem in your relationship, you've done something extraordinary.