

WHY ABUSE VICTIMS STAY

Breaking the Silence
JOURNEYS OF HOPE

Guide to Community Outreach



For Immediate Help Call the
National Domestic Violence Hotline
1-800-799-SAFE or 1-800-787-3224 TTD

For someone who has never experienced domestic violence, the question of why an abuse victim stays is one of the most difficult to comprehend.

If lawyers, judges, and other service providers are to help stem the tide of homicides and assaults, both physical and psychological, resulting from domestic violence, it is vital that they understand the many factors that influence the victim's decision to remain. The following list, while hardly exhaustive, describes some of the reasons why abuse victims stay.

Relationship With Batterer

- ▲ If the batterer holds a prominent position in the community, the victim may doubt her ability to make herself heard or believed.
- ▲ If the batterer is the primary wage earner, the victim may question her ability to provide for herself and her children.
- ▲ The victim may still love the batterer; if she has children, she may have concerns about separating them from their father and raising them alone.
- ▲ The batterer may blame the abuse on substance abuse issues or job stress, leading the victim to believe that if these problems can be solved, the domestic violence will end.

Children

- ▲ The victim may fear losing custody of her children—a Massachusetts study found that in 70% of the cases in which a father requested some form of custody, he was successful.

- ▲ The victim may believe it is in the children's best interests to live in a two-parent home.
- ▲ Batterers are capable of manipulating children to plead "just let Daddy come home!"

Economic Issues

- ▲ The victim may be without financial resources if she leaves, and may not have marketable job skills.
- ▲ Batterers may deny the victim access to money or financial records; batterers may also prohibit victims from working outside the home or may interfere with victims' attempts to gain or maintain employment by refusing to allow victims to go to job interviews or by harassing victims at their workplace.

External Pressures

- ▲ Family members may think there is no excuse for leaving a marriage or may have been deceived by the batterer's public charm or charisma.
- ▲ Religious beliefs may lead victims to think they must tolerate the abuse to adhere to their faith.
- ▲ Cultural defenses may be cited by batterers, victims, or other community members; similarly, the victim may feel torn between reporting the abuse and participating in a justice system she feels is biased against her ethnic or racial group.

Past Experiences

- ▲ A previous history of abuse with another partner may lead the victim to believe the batterer's claim, "See, this is what you drive your men to do!"

- ▲ Either the victim's or the batterer's substance abuse or alcoholism may lead the victim to fear her children will be removed if she seeks help.
- ▲ The victim knows her batterer, and may have good reason to fear he will follow through on his threats against her or her children if she leaves. It is estimated that a battered woman is 75% more likely to be murdered when she flees or has fled than when she stays—extensive safety planning is thus essential.
- ▲ If the victim grew up in an abusive household, low self-esteem or the belief that her experiences are the norm may bolster the batterer's attempts to maintain power and control over her.
- ▲ If the victim has had prior negative experiences with the court system, she may be skeptical of its ability or willingness to offer assistance.
- ▲ If the police have failed to respond to 911 calls or if they have minimized her fears and concerns and downplayed the violence when responding to past calls, victims may see little value in contacting them after further incidents of violence.

Physical or Logistical Challenges

- ▲ Batterers often isolate victims from friends and family. Victims may not know where to go for help. Victims living in rural communities may be even more isolated from resources such as shelters or domestic violence advocates.
- ▲ Physical challenges or disabilities may make it more difficult for the victim to access services and can also compound feelings of isolation.
- ▲ Mentally retarded or developmentally delayed individuals are particularly vul-

nerable to manipulation by a batterer and are more dependent on him for basic survival.

- ▲ Elderly victims may be more dependent on the batterer for care and may fear being placed in a nursing home if they leave the batterer. Moreover, elderly victims tend to hold more traditional beliefs about marriage and may not believe that divorce is an option for them.
- ▲ Medical problems may cause the victim to stay with the batterer to maintain insurance coverage.
- ▲ Victims may be without transportation to access child care or a job if they leave.
- ▲ A victim may feel there is literally no place to go—no affordable housing, no shelter that can accommodate her and her children.

Other Considerations

- ▲ The victim may be unaware that abuse constitutes a criminal offense, or that services that could help her are available in her community.
- ▲ Any number of special circumstances can affect a victim's willingness to leave. Spouses of military servicemen, spouses of law enforcement officers, members of the gay and lesbian community, previously incarcerated victims on parole, illiterate victims, and undocumented alien residents are all examples of victims who may face unique obstacles to leaving their abusive relationship.

Adapted from Sarah M. Buel, "Fifty Obstacles to Leaving, a.k.a., Why Abuse Victims Stay," The Colorado Lawyer vol. 28, no. 10 (Oct. 1999), pp. 19-28.

American Bar Association

Division for Public Education
541 North Fairbanks Court
Chicago, IL 60611-3314

Commission on Domestic Violence
740 15th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20005-1022

Publication of this brochure is supported by

MARY KAY

Mary Kay Inc.

"Breaking the Silence: Journeys of Hope" is a co-production of Tatge/Lasseur Productions, Inc. and Connecticut Public Broadcasting. The one-hour program will air on PBS stations nationwide beginning October, 2001.