

Why do they stay when they are being abused?

It's not uncommon to hear "Why do they stay in abusive relationships?" or "Why don't they leave?" These types of questions, although common, have a tendency — whether unintentional or not — to blame victims and to suggest they enjoy or thrive on being abused. If they didn't enjoy being ill-treated, they would leave, right? Obviously, if they choose to stay, they must have low self-esteem, right?

No. These attitudes are common myths about victims of domestic violence. The fact is that reasons for staying are far more complex than a blanket statement about a victim's character or strength of will.

In some cases, individuals may seem to "want" to be beaten. For those who come from dysfunctional families — families in which they were routinely beaten and emotionally abused as children — they know no other patterns of behavior and have learned to expect frequent incidents of violence. For such, the anxiety of waiting for the next outburst of violence is often more stressful and agonizing than the violence itself. They hate not knowing when they will next be hit, kicked, punched, burned, bitten, or stabbed, and they would rather "get it over with" than not know when they will next be abused. Often, it is dangerous for them to leave an abusive relationship. If the abuser is economically abusive and withholds all family money from them, leaving can lead to additional hardships. Leaving could mean living in fear of being stalked, fear of losing custody of any minor children (parental abduction is not uncommon), losing financial support, and experiencing harassment at work.

Some other reasons why they stay are:

- They may not recognize their partner's behavior as abuse. Some gay men and lesbians think that domestic violence only happens in heterosexual relationships, so they don't see it as something that can happen to them.
- Fear of being 'outed' or discriminated against if they seek help.
- They are committed to the relationship and may believe that they can work it out with their partner.
- They don't want to leave their home, their children or their pets.
- They are afraid of what their partner will do if they leave.
- They are dependent on their partner financially or for care needs.
- The abusive partner is sick and their partner doesn't want to leave them alone.
- They feel shame and don't want everyone to know about the abuse.
- They love their partner and want to believe the promises that 'it will never happen again'.
- Domestic violence is about power and control - they may not yet feel strong enough to make the break.

Do not underestimate the effects of domestic violence on its victims. Abused men and women experience isolation, shame, embarrassment, and humiliation. Individuals may not immediately leave an abusive relationship because:

- They fear their abusers will become more violent — perhaps fatal — stalking them if they leave.
- Friends and family may not support their decision to leave.
- They fear being a single parent with little money.
- There are periods of calm, nurturing and love between incidents of violence
- They may be unaware of sources of advocacy and support.
- They may be unaware of shelters and other resources that offer safety and support.