

Why Does She Stay?

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A few years ago, a woman came to me for counseling for difficulties in her relationship. It didn't take long for me to discover that my client was scared – that she or her children would get badly hurt, that she wasn't smart enough to leave, that she couldn't get the money to leave, that she was crazy, that no one would believe her.

In 1993, I began my counseling career working almost exclusively with victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. Now that I'm in private practice, I work with lots of different issues, but these situations are still in the mix. When people find out what work I used to do, they often ask some version of, "Why would anyone stay in an abusive relationship?"

The truth of the matter is that there are many reasons why someone would choose to stay in an abusive relationship. Some of these have to do with the impact of the abuse, and some are simply logical, strategic decisions.

Controlling people rarely try to attract mates by being overtly abusive. Usually, they put a mate 'on a pedestal', acting as if they have gotten unnaturally lucky to be with someone so much better than themselves. At some point, however, the tables turn, and the target goes from being on a pedestal to being under the controlling partner's thumb. By the time this happens, the target has become isolated, belittled, scared, and may have little access to resources. In this case, a target may feel ill equipped and incapable of managing life without the controlling partner.

Also, life with a controlling partner is not always horrible. They often have a mostly 'normal' life, which is punctuated by tense, scary, or confusing incidents. It becomes easy to believe that every time will be the last time, especially since a controlling partner is often very apologetic, sweet, and attentive after things have calmed down.

A target may also believe that leaving will trigger behavior that is worse than what has happened already. Statistics bear this out. A target is usually in the most physical danger in the period immediately before and after trying to leave a relationship. Some people make the (not unreasonable) assessment that staying will be scary, but leaving might be deadly, for the target, the children, or for other family members.

Relationships are rarely easy, but power and control dynamics in a relationship can make life infinitely harder to manage. In the end, my client had to weigh the very real risks of leaving against the risk she faced if she stayed. I was able to offer support, practical information for planning, and strategies to increase her safety, but everyone has to make this decision for themselves.