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Four Factors that Help Women Leave Abusive Relationships

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Four Factors that Help Women Leave Abusive Relationships

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4 FACTORS

TO HELP YOU LEAVE AN
ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP



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Being mistreated by the person you love, especially when physical abuse is involved, is one of the most frightening and traumatic experiences a woman can face, and it is hard to know what to do when it happens. A woman who is a victim of violence faces a particularly complicated dilemma. Should she stay or go? Although this may seem to be an easy choice, as discussed in my [last post](#), there are many issues that can make it difficult for a victim of domestic violence to leave. For instance, victimized women often love and feel committed to their partner, or they want to help him. They frequently have financial stressors, and may fear that if they try to leave, the abuser will hurt them or their children.

Still, most female victims of controlling male violence eventually do leave.^[1] It often takes several attempts, but many women find help and a way out of their abusive situation.

In my [research on this topic](#), I worked with colleagues to examine hundreds of Twitter

posts by victims of violence. These women used the hashtag #Whyleft to share reasons they left abusive relationships. We analyzed and coded these women's voices, and found four key factors they described as helpful in their journey to break free.^[ii]

Factor One – Facing Reality and Choosing Growth

Being hurt by someone you love is bewildering and painful, and a common reaction to it is uncertainty (i.e., “Did he really just hit me?” or “Did I do something to cause him to act this way?” or “Maybe he really is sorry and won't hurt me again”). But when abused women in our study comprehended the reality of the abuse, it was often a catalyst for leaving.

As one woman described it, “I learned ‘abuse’ was the word for what I was going through. Once I knew, I knew better.” Another stopped wishing things would change, and said, “I finally realized he will not change and never will.” One eventually saw through the abuser's lies: “I believed all the apologies and pledges of love but #whyleft I realized that those words were lifeless falling from cold dead lips.”

One confusing element of abuse occurs when abusers pressure victims to accept blame for what happened.^[iii] When these women realized the abuse was not their fault, it helped them regain self-worth. One woman tweeted, “I finally realized it wasn't my fault and that I didn't have to put up with it. My mental state deserved better, I deserved better.”

Seeing themselves accurately as a woman of worth also led to changes. “Because I woke up. Because I saw myself in the pain of my family's eyes. I deserved to love myself again,” another woman wrote. Others had similar insights: “I had to love myself and realize that it wasn't up to me to change him,” and “I learned to love me and left him.”

Factor Two – Accepting Support

Many victims become isolated from family and friends through the manipulations of the perpetrator. When these women were able to reconnect with other people in their life who loved them, they often found help and the strength to leave. Still, accepting support can be difficult. As one woman tweeted, “I finally told my family. I admitted to myself that I needed help and strength/support.” Another said it was “because of my dad,” and another “found friends that made me strong.” Some found healthier intimate relationships: “I met someone who showed me that love wasn't supposed to hurt, that love wasn't supposed to be scary or hard to talk about.”

Others cited spiritual and religious supports: “Because someone repeatedly told me I deserved better. Thank you scripture,” and, “Felt nudge from God when [the abuser] had a gun to my head... ‘Do not be afraid.’ Left next day.” Another “realized God had a safer plan for me and led me to my [current] husband, a man of integrity.”

Others benefited from professional help, tweeting: “My therapist told me that’s not love,” and another encouraged fellow victims to seek outside assistance: “Courage is not easy, but you can,” she wrote. “It is possible. Seek professional help.”

Factor Three – Protecting Children

Many of these women are mothers, and protecting their children was a high priority, which for some meant leaving. “I left because I had two daughters,” one woman wrote. “I didn’t want to be the excuse they used to put up with abuse later.” Another woman tweeted, “If I stayed any longer, my boys would not have only seen ‘how men are supposed to be’ but ‘how women are supposed to respond’.” And another explained: “He abused me in front of our children, I finally had enough. I didn’t want my children repeating the cycle.” One mother cited a specific incident that was a turning point: “When my 5 yo little girl asked why Daddy treats me like that with tears in her eyes, I knew I had to leave.”

A related reason women left was because of possible child abuse. One tweeted: “He turned that despising stare upon my children [and I] knew they were next.” Another wrote: “I knew he would hit our son and I risked losing custody for failure to protect.”

Factor Four – Fear and Exhaustion

Many women came to a breaking point when the fear and the pain simply became overwhelming. “I was tired of being afraid of the person I slept next to every night,” one wrote, while another needed a prompt from a friend: “Someone reminded me that living in fear isn’t supposed to be normal.” Another woman was worn down completely: “I was filled with so much anxiety. I had stomach issues, panic attacks, and TMJ. On the verge of insanity.”

Some tweets reflected a fear of being killed: “I knew I would never be happy with him. I feared that he might kill me one day,” and, “I knew he would kill me.” Others felt that things were getting to a dangerous level: “I didn’t want the next time that he hurt me to be the very last...ever,” one tweeted, and another wrote, “I actually felt the possibility of death breathing down my neck.”

In some relationships where intimate partner violence has occurred, couples are able to stop the violence and find better ways of interacting. Importantly, this requires the perpetrator to take responsibility for his behavior and learn how to become nonviolent.^[iv] However, abuse is always damaging to the spirit and body of a partner, and in many cases, the violence persists and often escalates. For many women, the safest choice is to just leave. As the brave women in our study shared, by finding courage and seeing support from loved ones, victims of intimate partners violence can break free of abuse and build a life of dignity and safety.

[i] Barnett, O. W., Miller-Perrin, C. L., & Perrin, R. D. (2011). *Family violence across the lifespan: an introduction* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

[ii] Cravens, J. D., Whiting, J. B., & Amar, R. (2015). Why I stayed/left: An analysis of voices of intimate partner violence on social media. *Contemporary Family Therapy*. DOI 10.1007/s10591-015-9360-8.

[iii] Whiting, J. B., Oka, M. & Fife, S. T. (2012). Appraisal distortions and intimate partner violence: Gender, power, and interaction. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*. doi: 10.1111/j.1752-0606.2011.00285.x

[iv] Merchant, L. V., & Whiting, J. B. (in submission) Factors in couples' desistance from domestic violence.