

Barriers to Leaving

Below are some of the reasons victims choose to stay or return to an abusive relationship

Commitment to the relationship: The abuser is the person the victim loves or once loved and may be the father/mother of the victim's children. This makes leaving the abuser especially difficult where violent episodes are followed by periods of affection and positive attention. The victim may want to end the violence, but also preserve the family relationship.

Lack of self-confidence: Ending an intimate relationship is almost always difficult, but even more so when the victim's self-confidence has been destroyed by abuse.

Believes the myths about domestic violence: Victims of domestic violence may assume that violence is an unavoidable part of life. Victims may also believe their abuser and blame themselves for the violence.

No place to go: There are more animal shelters in the U.S. than shelters for battered women and children. Domestic violence is the cause of half of the homelessness in America's women and children.

Hope of change: Many abusers are remorseful after abusing the victim; an abuser will promise never to hit again, agree to seek counseling, acknowledge the wrongfulness of his/her violence, ask the victim's help in stopping it, and demonstrate his/her love for the victim in meaningful ways. Since victims have often built their lives around the relationship, they hope for change.

Isolation: Many victims of domestic violence do not have a support system. The abuser has isolated them. For example, the abuser may prohibit the victim from using the phone, may humiliate him/her at family gatherings, may insist on transporting him/her to and from work, or may censor his/her mail. Abusers are often highly possessive and excessively jealous.

Societal denial: Victims of domestic violence fear that no one will believe that their partners abuse them. Abusers are often ingratiating and popular and keep their terrorizing and controlling behaviors within the family behind closed doors. Victims of domestic violence also discover that many people and agencies in the community trivialize the impact of domestic violence.

Abuser's threats: Even when the victim decides to leave, the abuser may threaten to seek custody of their children, to withhold financial support, to interfere with the victim's employment or housing, to kill other family members, to commit retaliatory suicide, or to escalate the violence in an attempt to keep the victim in the relationship.

Dangers in leaving: Many victims believe that leaving is not going to make his/her life and their children's lives safer. Many victims of domestic violence are killed by their partners after they have left the abuser. Many abusers escalate their violence in order to coerce the victim into reconciliation or to retaliate for the victim's departure.

Economic dependency: The most likely indicator of whether a victim of domestic violence will permanently separate from his/her abuser is whether s/he has the economic resources to survive without the abuser.

Leaving is a process: Most victims of domestic violence leave and return several times before permanently separating from the abuser. The first time a victim leaves may be a test to see whether the abuser will obtain help or stop his/her abuse. The victim may leave temporarily in order to gain more information about the resources available to her before leaving the abuser permanently. Most victims of domestic violence do leave eventually.

A confidential domestic violence survivors' support group can give someone considering leaving an abusive relationship valuable help and support. Call the Washington State Domestic Violence Hotline at 800-562-6025 for information on support groups in your area.