Why do women stay ?

People often wonder why women remain in or return to abusive relationships which appear to be so destructive for them. Here we explore some of the very good reasons.

**Power**

* **Fear of partner.** Women are often terrified of being found by their abusers. According to Women’s Aid workers and women in refuges, this fear is justified – men will go to great lengths to trace women, some of whom have been killed after they are found.
* **Fear of living alone.** She may: have been kept in isolation; have been denied contact with her family. She may have been totally controlled and does not know how to cope alone.
* **Lack of self respect/confidence.** She may have come to believe all the names she has been called and therefore feels worthless.
* **Guilt.** She may have been told by her abuser, family and friends that it is her own fault she is being abused, that she provoked the abuser and therefore in some way deserves what she gets.
* **Lack of support** from statutory agencies who often exhibit hostile attitudes, e.g. Police, DSS, Social Services, Housing Departments, Solicitors, Courts, etc.

**Practical Difficulties**

* **Money.** She may have no money and no idea that she could be entitled to benefits.
* **Accommodation.** Where will she go ? Even if she does know that she may be entitled to re-housing by the local authority, the prospect of moving into a refuge or bed and breakfast can be daunting.
* **Possessions.** She may have to leave everything behind in the knowledge that she is unlikely to see any of it again as it may be destroyed or sold by her abuser.
* **Children.** If she leaves, they may have to change schools, which is disruptive for all children, especially teenagers who may be taking exams. She may feel guilty about uprooting them and depriving them of their father. Children often miss their fathers if they leave and put pressure on their mothers to return, blaming the mother for what has happened.
* **Skills.** If she has been controlled, not been allowed to have any money, clothes or social contact or more generally no access to the public world, she may not know how to leave.

**Emotions**

* **Love.** Women often say that they want the abuse to stop, not the relationship.
* **Hope** for change. Men often promise to change ......... to stop drinking, taking drugs, to change jobs, to get help ........ Women are often optimistic and want to believe change is possible.
* **Pity.** Women often find explanations for men’s behaviour. He may be unemployed, stressed at work, depressed or dependent on alcohol. She may feel that if he can be helped with his problem he will stop abusing her.

Faced with this amount of opposition, it is surprising that so many women do manage to leave and stay away from abusive partners. Some women weigh up all the odds. They take into account the degree of support available to them and their children and the severity of the sanctions their abusers would be likely to receive. They may decide that, on balance, their best chance of survival is to stay. What women don’t need is for people to constantly say “why does she stay ?”. The attention needs to be shifted onto her abuser’s behaviour and instead we should be asking: “why doesn’t he stop abusing her ?”.

All of us have a role in supporting women in abusive relationships. If women receive positive support from friends, family, agencies and whoever they come into contact with, they are more likely to have the strength to make changes in their lives. It is quite likely that women will approach people on several occasions asking for help.

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