

Why Does He Do That?

What's in it for me? Learn to protect yourself from the physical and psychological effects of abuse.

What is abuse? And how can you tell if you are in an abusive relationship? Abuse is a complicated term. It includes a wide range of controlling, devaluing, or intimidating behaviors. These can be emotionally – and, in some cases, physically – damaging to the victim. Some male abusers are outwardly aggressive and violent toward their partners, while others manipulate, insult, or disrespect them. The thing is, a lot of abusive men don't seem like abusers; they can be charismatic, kind, and fun to be around. In fact, they may not fit anyone's image of what a cruel or intimidating person would look like. This makes it hard for some women to recognize when they're being mistreated. In these blinks, we'll take a deep dive into the psychology of the abusive man. You'll learn how his abusive thinking works and where it comes from. And you'll learn to identify the early warning signs of abuse. A short note before we begin: these blinks contain descriptions of abuse that may be upsetting. You'll also learn

why abusive men are charming on the surface; how to identify the signs that verbal aggression is heading toward violence; and the steps you can take to leave an abusive relationship.

Men can exhibit abusive behavior in multiple ways.

When Kristen first met Maury, he seemed like the man of her dreams. He was charming, funny, smart, and, best of all, he was crazy about her. But after they moved in together, things started to change. Maury began to accuse Kristen of being self-centered, overweight, and lazy. He also seemed to want to have sex less often. Things got worse when they had a baby together. Maury's moods would change in a flash. One moment, he'd be kind and loving; the next, he'd be cruel and unforgiving. The worst part of it all? Kristen blamed herself for not living up to what Maury needed. The key message here is: Men can exhibit abusive behavior in multiple ways. Male abusers exhibit a spectrum of behaviors. Some abusers are what the author calls physical batterers. These men seek to inflict physical damage on their partner. This style of abuse is more common than you might think: The American Medical Association has reported that one in three women will be a victim of violence by a husband or boyfriend in her lifetime. In the United States, statistics show that two to four million women are assaulted by their partner each year. Then there's emotional abuse. This includes verbal assaults, humiliation, sexual coercion, and psychological manipulation. These behaviors can be just as damaging as physical violence. In fact, many abuse survivors that the author has worked with have told him that emotional abuse caused them the greatest harm. Just think of Maury. He never physically harmed Kristen. But his anger, his unstable behavior, and his cruel insults were enough to inflict real psychological damage. And the damage can be substantial. Statistics show that the emotional effects of partner violence contribute to a quarter of female suicide attempts in the US. Partner abuse is also the primary cause of substance abuse in adult women. Of course, the categories of physical abuse and emotional abuse aren't entirely clean-cut. For example, physically

abusive men are usually also verbally abusive to their partners. And manipulative and controlling men tend to use physical intimidation, too. As a counselor, the author has worked with many abusive men. According to him, abusive behaviors often stem from the same source. Abusive men seek power; they desire control. They delight in making themselves seem superior to their partners. In the following blinks, we'll take a deeper look at how abusive thinking works. And we'll explore the reasons why some men grow up to be abusers.

Control and entitlement are central to the abuser's mindset.

Meet Glenn, one of the author's clients. He turned up angry and agitated to a group therapy session one night. He couldn't help but tell the whole room what had happened to him. Glenn's wife had told him that she was going to move out, for reasons he did not explain. Then she'd left for the weekend, taking their two-year-old son with her. Feeling rejected, Glenn decided to take revenge. His wife had spent a week writing a college paper that was due the following Monday. Glenn took it and tore it up into little pieces. Then he left the fragments of paper on the bed for her to come home to. Instead of feeling ashamed of his behavior, Glenn was pleased with himself. He told the group that he thought his wife would learn her lesson when she got home. The key message here is: Control and entitlement are central to the abuser's mindset. Glenn felt justified in ruining his wife's work, so he was remarkably honest about his motives. He believed that he had a right to control his partner's actions, and he did not accept defiance. So, when she tried to reclaim ownership of her life by leaving the house, he punished her in the most severe way he could think of. A desire to control is one of the key aspects of an abuser's mindset, and it comes in many different forms. For example, one of the author's clients would forbid his wife from speaking to anyone without his permission. And if he didn't like her outfit for the day, he would force her to change before leaving the house. Another trait that is central to the abusive man's mindset is entitlement. This includes the belief that his behavior - no matter how much damage it inflicts on another person - is totally valid. Some men feel entitled to use violence. Take a 1997 study of male psychology students. Ten percent of them believed it was acceptable to hit a female partner if she refused to have sex. A lot of these thought patterns are rooted in the abuser's sense of ownership; he believes his partner is his and that she should dedicate her life to carrying out his wishes. These beliefs are often embedded in an abuser's mindset from a young age. We'll take a look at how this happens in the next blink.

Abusive behavior is learned at a young age.

Consider what might make a person abusive. We could speculate that abusers come from broken homes. Or maybe they have some kind of psychological problem that causes them to inflict violence on others. But in reality, abusiveness isn't a product of a man's emotional wounds. It springs from his early male role models, his peers, and his cultural influences. The key message here is: Abusive behavior is learned at a young age. A boy's early education is inextricably linked to the way he'll behave in his adult relationships. And much of what he learns comes from the way his father acts toward

his mother. Say a boy's father thinks that a woman should commit her entire life to her husband's happiness. Then it's likely the boy will grow up believing the same. Even worse, if a boy grows up watching his father verbally degrade and physically intimidate his mother, he may replicate this behavior in his future relationships. In fact, studies have shown that nearly half of abusive men grow up in homes where their father is an abuser. Another thing that influences a man's behavior toward women is the media. Unfortunately, many books, songs, and TV shows romanticize the abuse of women. Eminem's popular song "Kim" is a good example of this. The song begins with the rapper putting his young daughter to bed. Then he prepares to murder his wife for cheating on him. He tells his wife that he's going to drive off with her - leaving the baby at home - and return home with her dead body in the trunk. After that, he audibly murders the Kim character. Even worse than Eminem's decision to record this violent song is the fact that it received a Grammy. Such music may send a message to young men that being brutal toward women is totally justified. A woman cheated on her partner, so she deserves to be punished - right? Abusers don't become abusive overnight; they learn abusive behavior starting at a young age. The abusive mindset becomes deeply entrenched, and by the time these boys reach adulthood, being manipulative and controlling is second nature.

Abusers are charming early in relationships, but they don't stay that way.

At first glance, Fran seemed like a normal guy. Sure, he was a little shy, but he was cute. At least, that's what Barbara thought when she first met him. Barbara pursued Fran for weeks. Eventually, they got together. But Fran always seemed so distant - as if he didn't quite trust her. After a while, Barbara found out that Fran's previous partner had cheated on him. Suddenly, Fran's edgy behavior made sense. Throughout their relationship, Barbara tried her best to make Fran feel secure. But nothing ever seemed to work. Fran was fiendishly jealous, and he constantly accused Barbara of checking out other men. Once, at a party they attended together, Fran saw Barbara chatting with a male friend and he flipped out. On the drive home, Fran pounded the steering wheel aggressively. And when they got out of the car, he shoved Barbara up against the door - hard. The key message here is: Abusers are charming early in relationships, but they don't stay that way. Abusive men have one thing in common: they're deceptive. When abusers first get into a relationship, they're kind and gentle. In this way, they lull their partners into a false sense of security. Then, over time, they start revealing their aggressive and manipulative tendencies. The truth is, abusers in relationships aren't abusive 24 hours a day. In fact, their moods are so up and down that one minute they can be angry and intimidating, and the next they can be sweet as pie. This is all part of the abuser's master plan to manipulate his partner. He creates turbulence, insecurity, and fear. That way, his partner can't recognize the pattern of his abusive behavior. Abusive men are also pretty good at escaping blame. They maintain their moral high ground by convincing you that you are the cause of their behavior. Think about Fran and Barbara. Fran physically assaulted Barbara just for chatting with another guy. He accused her of flirting, but the real problem was his irrational jealousy. This strategy often works. It's why many women blame themselves for being abused. They might think to themselves, "What is it about me that sets him off?" or "Why can't I give him what he needs?" Because male abusers are so charming, women often struggle to

identify when they're actually being abused. That's why women need to learn to recognize the early signs of abuse. If they can do this, they can protect themselves physically and psychologically.

There are subtle signs of abuse that appear early in a relationship.

Is there any way to avoid an abusive relationship? It's a question the author often gets from victims of male abusers. Of course, there's no surefire way to spot an abuser. But there are several warning signals that you can watch out for. The key message here is: There are subtle signs of abuse that appear early in a relationship. One of the first signs that a man could be abusive is if he speaks disrespectfully about his former partners. Of course, being a little resentful toward an ex-partner is normal. But it is concerning if the man you're dating speaks about his exes in degrading or condescending ways - or if he paints himself as the victim. Also, be especially wary of men who say their previous partners falsely accused them of abuse. More often than not, women's reports of abuse are accurate. Another sign to watch out for is if a man gets too serious too quickly. If he starts planning your future together before taking the time to get to know you, this could mean he's trying to claim ownership over you. The same goes for men who do favors for you that you don't want, or who put on a show of generosity that makes you uncomfortable. This could indicate that a man is trying to create what the author calls a "sense of indebtedness." This is what the author's client Alan did. He spent the first two years of his relationship with his girlfriend, Tory, doing favors for her family. He helped Tory's brother fix his car, and he helped Tory's sister paint her new apartment. But Alan didn't treat Tory very nicely. In fact, he constantly disrespected her. Naturally, Tory's family became upset by how Alan was treating her. But Alan was able to convince Tory that her family had taken advantage of his generosity. He drove a wedge between Tory and her family - and continued manipulating her for years after that. That's the thing about abuse. It can be so subtle. Often, it starts with control and disrespect. Then it transforms into verbal - or even physical - assaults further down the line. This shift can be hard to discern. So it's important to check in with yourself if you even think you're being abused.

If you suspect you're being abused, consider leaving your partner.

Picture this: Lately, you've been feeling depressed. Your self-confidence is at rock bottom. Your relationships are suffering. Not only are you getting more distant from your family and friends, but your boyfriend is constantly mad at you. You've had so many arguments lately that you feel like you can't do anything right. The thing is, your partner has been getting kind of aggressive, too - in fact, you're starting to feel afraid. If you could somehow be better, you think, maybe all your relationship problems would disappear. Does this sound familiar? If it does, this could be a sign that your partner is abusive - and that things might escalate if you don't take action soon. The key message here is: If you suspect you're being abused, consider leaving your partner. Many of the women that the author works with tend to take a "wait and see" attitude when signs of abuse emerge. They tell themselves that they love their partner. They say, "It's too hard to leave him right now." They figure they'll do something if things get worse. Thinking

like this is dangerous. In many cases, the longer you stay with an abuser – and the more destructive he becomes – the harder it is to free yourself from him. Even worse, waiting too long to leave your abusive partner may result in your being physically harmed. Your boyfriend or husband may not be violent yet, but that could change very quickly. And there are telltale signs that violence may be on the horizon. For starters, the most common precursor of physical violence is increased verbal abuse. If your partner starts to make threats like “You don’t want to see me mad” or “You don’t know who you’re messing with,” then physical violence may come next. Another sign is if your partner starts to use physical intimidation. He might come very close to your face or poke, push, or restrain you. He might throw things and punch doors. Even if it seems unintentional, intimidation is a sign that emotional abuse is already underway – and that physical violence may follow. If you regularly find yourself in such circumstances, don’t wait until the last moment to leave. In the next blink, we’ll look at how you can create a strategy for safely exiting a relationship.

Before leaving your partner, put a safety plan in place.

Have you ever sat at home at night, dreading the moment your partner will walk through the door? Do you tremble hearing his key turn in the lock? Have you ever imagined making a bolt for the front door and running away – leaving him behind? If the answer to any of these questions is yes, then it sounds like you’ve already considered breaking up with your abusive partner. But before you do, it’s important that you plan a way to accomplish this safely. The key message here is: Before leaving your partner, put a safety plan in place. Safety plans involve two steps: one for increasing your safety while you’re living with your partner and another step for after you leave him. A safety plan for while you’re living with your abusive partner can include some of the following elements. First, set up code words to indicate an emergency situation. You can do this with your friends or relatives, or even with your children. Then, plan how they should respond if you say the code word, either in person or over the telephone. Next, plan different escape routes from your house in case your partner becomes violent. This includes figuring out where you would go if you needed somewhere to stay overnight – say, a friend’s place or a hotel room. Make sure to hide away spare keys and important documents like birth certificates, health insurance cards, and bank cards. Put these in a place where you can grab them if you need to leave quickly. Once you’ve left your partner, it’s important that you practice the same level of caution as when you were living with him. Start by changing the locks on your home. Then, give your neighbors a photo and a description of the abuser and his car. That way, they, too, can be on red alert if your ex-partner shows up in the neighborhood. It’s also a good idea to advise the local police department of the risk posed by the abuser. Make sure you detail any past threats or violence your partner has committed, and ask what special services or protection might be available. If you have kids, inform their teachers and school administrators about the risk. Above all, don’t tell your partner that you are breaking up with him until you have a plan in place – just in case he gets violent. Instead, only inform him once you’re in a safe environment.

You can’t change an abusive man; he has to change himself.

One of the author's most memorable clients was a guy called Van. Nine months before he started attending group therapy sessions, Van had nearly killed his partner, Gail, in a beating. The author recalls how Van spoke about the assault: he admitted it was bad, and he blamed it on himself. For weeks, Van was the author's star group member. He would challenge other men about their denial. He even accepted Gail's need to be separated from him. However, after a while, Van's progress began to slide. He realized that Gail wasn't taking a break from their relationship. Instead, she was cutting herself loose. Within a few weeks, Van cornered Gail in a restaurant. He called her a "fucking bitch." Then he was thrown in jail for violating his restraining order. In that moment, all the progress he'd made vanished. It was like he hadn't changed at all. The key message here is: You can't change an abusive man; he has to change himself. According to the author, most abusive men don't make deep and lasting changes – even in a high-quality abuser program. This is because abusers are often reluctant to face up to the damage they have caused women. They also cling tightly to their excuses and victim-blaming. For an abusive man to make genuine progress, he needs to go through a complex set of steps. These include admitting to his history of abusiveness, acknowledging that the abuse was wrong, and developing respectful behaviors and attitudes. Perhaps the most important step for an abusive man is accepting that overcoming his abusive tendencies is a lifelong process. He has to commit to not repeating his abusive behaviors. Then, he has to honor that commitment. This means that he can't place any conditions on his improvement. For example, he can't say that he won't call you names as long as you don't raise your voice at him. And if he does revert back into abusive behaviors, he can't justify it by saying something like, "But I've done great for months. You can't expect me to be perfect." The most important thing to remember is this: You can't help an abusive man to change. His desire to do so has to come from within.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: Abuse comes in many forms – and it's not just limited to physical abuse. Abusive behavior is anything that demeans, humiliates, manipulates, or frightens another person. The problem is, abuse is a hard thing to tackle; it can take an abuser a lifetime to unlearn his behaviors, and it all depends on his will to change. Actionable advice: Notice when his "changed" attitude is just for show. Abusers are pretty crafty. An abuser can create the appearance of being a changed man when, actually, he hasn't changed at all. So the next time you hear an abuser tell you that he's turned his life around, don't be too quick to take his word for it. If he's still not taking full responsibility for his actions, or respecting your freedom and independence, chances are he's got a long way to go. And keep in mind – if you or someone you know is in an abusive relationship, seek help. Look for local resources. Speak with friends and family. Abuse isn't something you have to deal with alone. Got feedback? We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with Why Does He Do That? as the subject line and share your thoughts! What to read next: Anger Management for Dummies, by Charles H. Elliot, Laura L. Smith, W. Doyle Gentry You've just learned how the anger of an abusive man can have lethal consequences on women. The blinks to Anger Management for Dummies give actionable advice for how people, especially men, can manage their anger. The authors offer practical methods for dissolving stress, dealing with provocations, and defusing anger before it strikes. They also give tips for how to use anger constructively. So if your anger is out of control and you need help to overcome it, head over to the blinks to Anger Management for Dummies.

