**Why We Stay: A Deeper Look At Domestic Abuse**

Ali Owens

The choice is clear — the man is a terrible person and obviously, the woman should leave. If she stays, we believe, she is partly responsible for the physical and emotional damage inflicted upon her, because she could have prevented it by getting the hell out of dodge and never looking back. In a way, we suggest tentatively...isn’t she almost asking for it?

Real domestic abuse rarely plays out like this. It is never simple, and it is never black and white. **Leaving is never the easy choice — it is just one more painful choice in a reality full of painful choices.** And the people who insist this isn’t so have no idea. I, on the other hand, as a survivor of domestic abuse, have quite a bit of an idea. Now that that’s out of the way, here are five reasons someone in an abusive relationship may stay with their abuser - reasons that have nothing at all to do with financial stability.

**1. We are afraid of being shamed, judged, hated, or accused of lying.**

You hear it all the time — an allegation of domestic abuse is waved away, with the reasoning, “I know him — he would never do that, she’s making it all up, he’s a nice guy.” News flash: people with abusive tendencies are often very, very good at creating a public image that differs tremendously with what happens behind closed doors. In fact, a calculating and manipulative mindset is extremely common in people who abuse their partners. Anyone can seem nice; abusers don’t wear signs around their necks. **Claiming that someone you know isn’t capable of abuse because “he seems so nice” is absolutely not a sound method of reasoning, because you do not know the whole story.**

During the nine-year duration of our relationship, there were so many instances in which I wanted to tell someone what was going on. But I was paralyzed by fear: fear that no one would believe me. Fear that they’d think I was only looking for attention. Fear that they’d call me a fool for sticking around. Fear that they’d label me a liar, just the way so many people have done to Amber Heard, without knowing anything about what actually transpired.

**2. Abuse is generally cyclical, and most abusers follow a pattern that keeps victims feeling trapped.**

**This is another behavioral pattern that is extremely common in abusive relationships.** It was as though my ex could sense when I was about to throw in the towel, and he’d suddenly be back to his old, loving self, making it very difficult for me to justify leaving him — especially because I loved him and desperately wanted us to be able to function in a healthy relationship.

And occasionally — generally after a particularly cruel incident — he would have a “moment of clarity” in which he would get down on his knees, sobbing, telling me he hated himself for what he’d done to me and begging me to forgive him. He would promise me that he’d get counseling, that he’d do whatever it took to get better, that things would be different. In doing so, he was giving me hope: maybe he’ll change, and everything will get better. Faced with the notion of finally having a healthy relationship with him, I found I couldn’t leave. I’d remember the good times we’d shared and feel optimistic that there would be more of them on the horizon. **This is precisely how abusers wield control over their partners** — they dangle the carrot, the promise of change, just out of reach, so that the victim always feels hopeful that the change will actually occur and feels compelled to stick it out.

**3. We love our partners.**

Anyone who’s ever been in love knows that it’s no simple thing. Is it possible to love someone who abuses you? Absolutely. Furthermore, since abusive behavior is very rarely black and white, it makes things much more complicated than “should I stay or should I go.” For example, those “moments of clarity” I spoke of were the undoing of me. Despite everything he’d put me through, to see him collapse in tears like that — to see him hurt so much — nearly destroyed me. So even though I knew all too well the terrible things he’d done, in those moments, he seemed to me like a lost, broken boy — and I would ache for him. I loved him so much that seeing his pain felt far worse than the pain he inflicted on me. And I couldn’t walk away — not when he was hurting. Not when he needed me.

**4. Emotional abuse, manipulation and gaslighting have wreaked havoc on our self-esteem, and we do not trust our own thoughts or feelings.**

My ex gave me some pretty wicked bruises in our nine years together. But overwhelmingly, the most crippling form of abuse he bestowed upon me was emotional. Gaslighting is a term describing a form of mental abuse in which the victim is manipulated into doubting their own memory, perceptions or sanity — and **it is very, very dangerous, and so much more prevalent than most people realize.**

Remember when I said that a common trait of an abusive personality type is to be calculating and manipulative? That all comes into play here in a particularly cruel way when the abuser uses these traits against his partner. It starts subtly — imperceptibly. The abuser will slowly begin to whittle away at her self-esteem, suggesting, perhaps, that she has emotional issues or is always overreacting. Small things, nothing you could in all fairness call “abuse” yet — but the seeds have been planted. As the years go on, he will take these insecurities that he has deliberately given her and use them against her, manipulating her more and more until she is so mired in his mind games that she has no idea what to believe — or even who she is. And if she ever so much as mentions the possibility of abuse, he will twist everything around until she believes she’s crazy for even thinking such a thing, and that everything is actually her fault.

Doubting the validity of your own thoughts and experiences is exhausting and terrifying, and it leaves you very, very vulnerable. Abusers know this. **When you’ve spent years being told that your thoughts and feelings are inherently incorrect, you don’t know what to feel — and often, you will wind up hating yourself instead of the person who hurts you, because you assume you must have done something to deserve it.** When you’ve been made to believe you can’t trust yourself, leaving an abusive situation becomes impossible.

**5. We fear retaliation.**

Simply running away from an abusive partner does not always mean the abuse will stop. In many cases, abusers will go so far as to stalk, rape, or even kill the women who tried to leave them. **Sometimes it is very literally**not safe**to leave.** Luckily for me, I was able to immediately move to a different city an hour away, which lessened my chances of encountering my ex. I didn’t have to constantly keep my guard up for fear I’d run into him at the grocery store — nor did I believe he would go so far as to be a danger to me. But many women aren’t so lucky, and the thought of leaving makes them legitimately fear for their lives.

The roots of abuse are deep and twisted, and it is impossible to understand the dynamic of a relationship that you yourself are not a part of. Next time you find yourself tempted to say something judgmental about someone who has remained in an abusive situation for a period of time — please remember these words, from someone who knows, and just don’t. Victim blaming is all too common in today’s society — my hope is that if we shed more light on a topic classically shrouded in darkness, we can put an end to the victim blaming and help keep people safer in their relationships.

(Adapted from <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ali-owens/why-we-stay-a-deeper-look_b_10315292.html>)

Questions:

1. What is the topic of the essay? What does it focus on – causes, effects or both?
2. How is the essay structured? How does it begin and end? What are the functions of each paragraph?
3. Does the writer produce strong evidence to strengthen the analysis?
4. Do you notice anything specific regarding language use? For instance, some words/ phrases are italicized for a specific reason. What could it be?