

Domestic Violence

Susan Peabody

I have had low self-esteem all of my life and as a result I ended up in one dysfunctional relationship after another. I never thought I was good enough for someone to really love me so I settled for men who would live with me and let me play house. Most of these men were selfish or alcoholic, but my ex-husband was verbally and physically abusive.

I finally got out of this relationship with the help of LAA and my therapist. It really is not difficult to break up when you face your fear and get help. I did it for my children long before I realized that I deserved better. Later in therapy, I wanted to know why I stayed in an abusive relationship even when I was unhappy. Here is what I came up with. Here is what you have to fight against if you are in an abusive relationship.

Low Self-Esteem: You do not think you deserve any better and that if you leave no one new will come along. You are terrified of being alone, abandoned, or lonely. You think this current relationship is better than nothing.

Dependency on the Relationship: Sometimes you are dependent on the relationship, and you would rather suffer physical pain than endure the emotional pain of breaking up. You cannot tolerate separation anxiety.

Abusive Parents: Sometimes you had an abusive parent and the abuse does not seem out of the ordinary. It seems normal. It may even be equated with love. An abusive parent can also be loving, so battered children grow up confusing love with abuse. This confusion becomes a distorted value which influences them as adults.

Peers: In some case, abuse may seem ordinary because all of our friends are being abused as well. In some environments domestic violence is the norm. It may seem futile to try and change the status quo.

It's my fault: Sometimes we blame ourselves rather than their partner. We are sure it is our own fault that we did something to provoke our partner. Sometimes we even think we deserve the abuse. We keep trying to change ourselves so it won't happen again.

Gullibility: Sometimes we are gullible and don't learn from the past. We believe our partner when he or she says the abuse will never happen again. Like children, we cling to the fantasy that this person will change.

Sympathy: Sometimes we feel sorry for our partner when he or she asks for forgiveness. We know our partner is sick so we decide to take care of him or her rather than end the relationship. Caretakers are used to putting the needs of others before their own. This is misguided compassion.

Loyalty: Sometime we feel that we made a commitment and we must be loyal no matter what—that it would be wrong to change their mind. We feel guilty if we reject someone, even if that someone is abusing us. This is misguided loyalty.

Fear of abandonment: Sometimes we project our fear of abandonment onto our partners. We don't want to do to them what was done to us. This was my biggest weakness.

Fear of revenge: Sometimes we are terrified of leaving an abusive partner because we fear revenge or because we are financially dependent on this person.

Martyr's complex: This is controversial, but some of us have a martyr's complex. We feel superior when we suffer in the name of love. We wear abuse like a badge of courage. In a twisted sort of way this actually

elevates our self-esteem. Christians especially fall into this trap. They think that because Christ died on the cross for the sins of mankind that we should die on the cross for the sins of our partner. Some Christians read in the Bible that "love bears all things" and we think that this includes abuse. I don't think it does. Non-Christians fall into this trap also. They listen to the song "Stand by your man," and think it is romantic to stick with a relationship no matter what.

Making up: Sometimes we don't like being abused, but we like making up. For instance, when our partner is begging for forgiveness we feel superior and in control. We like the attention. We like the flowers and apologies, so we talk ourselves into believing that these gestures of remorse actually make up for the abuse.

Negative attention: Sometimes we are so starved for attention that even negative attention will do. We might tell ourselves that if he/she didn't love me so much he/she wouldn't be so angry. This is twisted thinking and can lead to trouble.

Once you get out of a relationship it is important to understand why we stayed. This will prevent this problem from becoming a pattern in our life. In the movie "The Burning Bed," the victim of domestic violence killed her husband and then went on to another abusive relationship after being acquitted. This has to stop. We deserve more than this cycle of abuse. We deserve to be happy and safe.