

ARE YOU AN ABUSED WOMAN?

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“It didn’t start out like this, I thought that he was the most attentive person that I had ever met”. recalled Shirley. “He paid attention to my child. He showered me with gifts and made me feel wonderful.

I knew that he had strong ideas but thought that it was because he wanted the best for us”. Soon those strong ideas involved dictating what Shirley could say, what she could wear and where she could go. “ I told myself that this was because he loved me. I stopped wearing make up as he would accuse me of trying to attract other men. I came straight home from work to avoid the outbursts that started when I was a few minutes late. If I had to stop at the supermarket I remember the tight knot as I rushed to get home as soon as possible. My friends became a problem. Each one seemed to have something wrong with them. My family members irritated him. I slowly stopped contact with other people to stop the sarcasm, the outbursts and the mess in my head.” I seemed to be like a frightened chicken, a part of me angry at his behaviour but at the times when he was relaxed I would forget about his ways and remember how kind he could be.

I didn’t laugh anymore or express an opinion. I didn’t want to make love one day. I told him and never stopped hearing how I must be sleeping with all the guys at work. This deteriorated. He called me a slut . In his mind this had become a reality. Saying no was no longer an option. I knew he checked my cellphone and I did not dare comment on it.

Then it was the food I cooked that he couldn’t eat. If he was in a mood he would throw it on the floor and make me clean it up. My child was constantly picked on.

At first I rationalized that he was under stress at work. The change from the loving, caring and generous person I had met was instant after the marriage. It must be something external that was causing it I believed. Some women blame alcohol but he didn’t drink.

When he said it was my fault I tried correcting the things he had a problem with. I cooked different meals, I gave up my friends, I changed the clothes I wore. But slowly I began to realize that it was not those things that were the problem. He would always find something else to berate me about – physically, mentally or emotionally.

Of course he controlled the money. Soon he made it impossible for me to work. He caused trouble, checking up on me, phoning up to 30 times a day to see if I was there, and eventually I had to leave. What a joke. I looked so terrible by that stage nobody would have looked at me. Once you are not working you do not have the money to go.

I did not have the strength to leave anyway. I once told one of my relatives about the abuse She asked me what I did to cause his behaviour. I never told anyone after that.

I became very anxious, always looking out for his moods when he came home, trying to keep ahead of his needs, trying to agree to make sure that he would not be unhappy or get out of control. In between he could be very happy and I, relieved. But it was temporary. Then one day I just started crying uncontrollably. I could not stop. My child came home from school and couldn’t calm me . Finally I had to go to the doctor. That night I knew that I would kill myself if I did not get away. I would have to get help without my husband knowing. I could not put my child through this anymore”.

Being in that situation is like being a hostage. While you are not tied up or locked away, you are at the mercy of your captor. You are allowed to feel what they tell you, think what they tell you and be what they tell you so that in the end it is impossible to leave this situation without a lot of assistance.

“Until I went for help I didn’t ever imagine that this was all about control.”

WHY DO WOMEN STAY IN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS?

About 30% of all women who have an intimate relationship with a man will be physically abused at least once. Other forms of abuse like emotional and verbal abuse always go with physical abuse. Abuse usually increases in frequency and severity over time.

We often lack empathy for women who don't leave abusive men or who leave and go back. However, they are not passive in their situation but a number of factors come together to make leaving very difficult.

- * Economic Dependence.
- * Emotional dependence due to loss of sense of self in the relationship.
- * Low self-esteem.
- * Embarrassment and shame over being abused.
- * Often people blame women for the abuse
- * The stigma of divorce in some cultures.
- * Value of marriage.
- * Fear/threats – A high number of women are killed after leaving.
- * Lack of knowledge of legal options.
- * No place to go.
- * Children.
- * Positive feelings towards the husband
- * Belief that he will change
- * Inadequate social services/ support e.g. Police attitudes/ medical services

To deal with an abusive relationship it is usually important to get help in order to rebuild self esteem, deal with fear of the future, get knowledge about legal options and make decisions about what you want to do with your life, even if you want to stay in the relationship.