

WHY DON'T THEY JUST LEAVE?

Learned Helplessness:

The theory of learned helplessness states that helplessness and depression will develop in the victim in response to their loss of ability to predict what actions will produce a particular outcome. The victim learns to choose only those actions that will probably be successful in diminishing the abuse and they use these behaviors over and over rather than trying a new behavior, for which the response will be unknown to them. They become “survival-focused” as opposed to “escape-focused”. Surviving within the relationship becomes their focus, and they may still appear confident, independent, etc. to outsiders, but all the while the abuser becomes more powerful in their eyes. They view others as less able to help them and they feel trapped and alone. They become depressed, fearful, helpless, and dependent. As time goes on they view escape as impossible. Lenore Walker, creator of the Cycle of Abuse, believes that “if a woman is to escape such a relationship, she must overcome the tendency to learned helplessness survival techniques, becoming angry rather than depressed and self-blaming; active rather than passive; and more realistic about the likelihood of the relationship continuing on its aversive course rather than improving. She must learn to use escape skills compatible to the survival behaviors already adopted.”*

According to the US Dept. of Justice the dynamics of relationship abuse are similar to techniques used to control or brainwash prisoners of war. “These techniques induce dependency, dread, and debility...the victim tends to become immobilized by the belief that they are trapped, cannot escape. This heightening of fear, helplessness, dependency, and dread are all intertwined in the definition and dynamics of abuse.”*

Traumatic Bonding Theory:

This theory explains the dynamics of domestic violence and explains why victims stay with their abuser or return to the relationship. It states that “strong emotional connections develop between the victim and the perpetrator during the abusive relationship. These emotional ties develop due to the imbalance of power between the batterer and the victim and because the treatment is intermittently good and bad. In terms of the power imbalance, as the abuser gains more power, the abused..feels worse about himself/herself and is less able to protect themselves and is less competent. The abused person therefore becomes increasingly dependent on the abuser. The second key factor in traumatic bonding is the intermittent and unpredictable abuse...the abuse is offset by an increase in positive behaviors such as attention, gifts, and promises. The abused individual also feels relief that the abuse has ended. Thus, there is intermittent reinforcement for the behavior, which is difficult to extinguish and serves instead to strengthen the bond between abuser and the individual being abused.”*

Approach and Avoidance Theory:

The mix of pros and cons present in the abusive relationship “leads to ambivalence on the part of the victim. The victim is likely to want to approach the positives in the relationship but avoid the abuse. This struggle between wanting to keep the relationship and wanting to remain safe makes it difficult to decide whether to leave or stay.”** **On average, victims tend to leave and return about 7 times before leaving permanently.**

Given all of the above, along with guilt, feelings of failure, embarrassment, humiliation, lack of support, lack of resources...should we even ask the question “Why don’t they just leave?”.

*www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc/assist/nvaa99/chap8.htm US Dept of Justice

**www.ncptsd.va.gov/facts/specific/fs_domestic_violence.html US Dept of Veterans Affairs