

# When You're in a Violent Relationship

Aztec



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# Hurting the ones we love

If you go looking for statistics on domestic violence and “who’s doing what to whom,” you’ll find literally hundreds of numbers to think about. However, some jump out at you:

- *Over 1600 women die at the hands of an intimate partner every year, compared to about 700 men.*
- *Close to half of all female homicide victims die at the hands of their partners. That compares to about one in 20 male homicide victims killed by an intimate partner.*
- *One in four American women have been, or are being, abused by their partner, compared to one in nine men.*
- *Intimate partner violence results in two million injuries among women and 600,000 injuries among men annually.*
- *Over 1700 children die every year as a result of maltreatment by their parents.*

## Finding a safe haven

While most women of previous generations were expected to “stand by their man” no matter what, today women are urged to leave their abusive partners, and there are many social services in place to teach them *how* to do that more safely.\*

Leaving an abusive partner, however, *is only the beginning of recovery*. The abusive relationship leaves a deep imprint on anyone who’s been hurt, and she carries that with her into her new life and her new relationships.

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\*Both genders are victims — and perpetrators — of domestic violence. However, researchers tell us a large majority of the injuries and deaths recorded each year are the result of male on female violence. To acknowledge these statistics, this booklet will use “he” to refer to perpetrators and “she” to refer to the abused person. Readers are reminded that this does not diminish the consequences or impact of female on male violence, or same sex violence.

## Change doesn't always come easy

This is why, if you have left or are thinking about leaving an abusive relationship, it's so very important to learn how to manage your feelings in a new and positive way.

That's something easier said than done. But if you're going to create safety and freedom for yourself, you do need to learn how to do it.

Imagine a girl who falls off her bike and breaks her arm. If she refuses to get treatment for her arm, it will probably heal *but it won't ever look or function the way it used to*. If, on the other hand, she has the bone set — even if that means surgery — the outcome is likely to be much better. It's true that she'll go through greater discomfort for a short time... but, after that, she'll have her arm back, just about as good as new.



Recovering from an abusive relationship is a lot like that. You may need to go through some discomfort in learning to live again, but it leads to the strength and know-how you need to reach your goals.

## Becoming a victim

**B**ecause of their cultural upbringing, some young women enter a relationship with a limited sense of their own strength and importance... they expect men will dominate the relationship, so being pushed around is an unpleasant but not entirely unexpected part of a relationship.

## For most, it's a learned process

But while some women may expect it, most don't; and for almost all, the first episode of violence comes as a painful

shock. If you stay in the relationship — as most women do, at least for a time — you find you must learn how to do two things

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*The skills of a survivor  
are also the skills  
of a victim.*

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very well: behave in a way that will keep your partner from exploding into rage, and roll with the punches when he explodes anyway.

These are the skills of a survivor, but they are also the skills of a victim. You learn to see yourself as weak, passive, and stuck with this man no matter what he does.

## Why don't women leave?

Why do **more than half** of all women stay with a man even after he has hurt them? And if they do leave, why does it usually take them **so long**? You may think of many serious reasons: *I can't afford it; marriage is meant to be forever; I have nowhere to go; he'll kill me if I leave; he'll kill himself if I leave; he's wonderful when he's not mad; things will get better.*

There's another reason why it's hard to leave. Most victims have been subjected to control and abuse so unrelenting that they no longer believe in their own power to act. Besides physical harm, partner abuse usually includes:

- **Verbal abuse:** the man constantly criticizes and belittles the woman, emphasizing her helplessness;
- **Material dependence:** the man controls the money and can use it to reward or punish the woman;
- **Social isolation:** the man controls the woman's activities and her contacts with family and friends;
- **Loving attention:** the man may be the woman's only source of companionship and intimacy.

# The process changes who you are

Everything that happens to us changes us, sometimes in small ways, sometimes in deep ways. The process of becoming a victim has an impact on every woman's personality, no matter who they are.

Among prisoners of war, hostages held captive for a long time, *and* people trapped in an abusive relationship, the effects are clear. First, there are the short-term effects... the feelings that arise just after a violent episode:

- **Hurt and shock**, especially if there was trust before;
- **Rage**, which is often stuffed inside and not expressed;
- **Fear** of the abuser and of the situation;
- **Guilt** over somehow having caused the violence; feelings that persist even though you know that it's the abuser who is the *only* one responsible for his actions;
- **Powerlessness**, a feeling of weakness and vulnerability;
- **Isolation** from others who seem happy and safe.



## It's about power

Experts on partner violence understand that the violence occurs because one partner wants (and feels he *needs* and *deserves*) power over the other. Studies of abusive men show that their actions stem from a need to control the victim; to keep the victim helpless and dependent; to prove that the abuser is strong and is the one who has the right to be in charge.

This may be a husband battering his wife, a teenaged boy twisting his girlfriend's arm, an adult slapping his live-in adult lover. In each case, the abuser uses violence as a way to establish *control*.

## If the abuser has power...

If the abuser uses violence to gain and demonstrate power, where does that leave the one being abused?

As the one being hurt, you begin to feel *powerless, helpless, and trapped*. There are certainly other feelings involved, but these are the most common, regardless of your age, gender, or sexual preference. And they're the feelings that make recovery so difficult.

## The long and short of it

**R**ecovering from any major life problem — addiction, divorce, violence, war — starts with understanding the specific things you're recovering from. Partner abuse causes changes... some are immediate and brief, and some become a way of life, the way you now interact with others.

### Short-term reactions...

When you've recently been hurt, your emotional state is the same as that of anyone who's just had a traumatic experience, from war injuries to car accidents. This state of mind is called

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*Post-traumatic stress is a normal and expected response to abuse.*

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*post-traumatic stress*, and it's the expected result of any event that you experience as being too awful to cope with.

Post-traumatic stress includes symptoms such as flashbacks (unwanted, repetitious memories of the attack); nightmares; general nervousness; sleep disturbances; loss of appetite; and an odd, disturbing sense of emotional numbness.

Many people who have had their first experience with domestic violence describe it as a whole different world:

- “I feel like I’ll never be the same again.”
- “Everything seems different to me now.”
- “When I think of how things were before, it seems like a thousand years ago.”

You feel this way because, for you, the world *has* changed. The danger and fear that are usually associated with the *outside* world have come *in...* as close as they can get. The threat of being hurt is not out on the streets, but at home with the very person you trusted most.

## Getting mad

It’s a basic response to get angry at someone who hurts you. If you are upset enough to leave your partner after the first incident, you will still have feelings of rage and helplessness that are the *normal* aftermath of being hurt.

Almost always, a battered woman is shocked and confused by the fact that her lover has deliberately harmed her. You may find it hard to concentrate, and you’re likely to be weepy and easily upset. Your anger and emotional upset will probably last longer than the actual physical marks and pain from the assault.

But while some women are so furious that they never allow the man near them again, many more allow themselves to be convinced that the assault was a one-time episode... a fluke. Your partner is likely to help you with this line of thinking, until you both believe that it happened only because he was tired, or drunk, or you “pushed him too far.”

This is how you learn to stifle your anger and fear, preferring instead to keep the relationship. But this takes a great deal of emotional energy and shows up in sleeping and eating disturbances, loss of sexual interest, or the feeling of just not being “with the program.”





## ...and the long-term reactions

Girls and women who remain in abusive relationships become enmeshed in the abuser's control. All of his actions — not just the violent ones — are designed to produce this result. Behaviors that allow the man to develop and maintain control include:

- yelling at you;
- deliberately scaring you;
- using love, money, and sex to win your cooperation;
- making decisions for you;
- appearing to be very “protective” of you;
- appearing to see you as a heavy burden;
- speaking to you in ways that suggest you are helpless, stupid, and incapable of doing anything right.



Because of *all* these factors — not just the violence — it can

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*You may come to feel  
that you're no longer  
in control of your own life.*

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be very difficult to leave and start over on your own. You may find that control by your partner has become such a routine way of living that you no longer believe in your ability to run your own life. It's crucial to understand that this

is *not* reality; it's the effect of having been controlled for so long.

Other common long-term effects of violence on women:

- **Dependence on the abuser:** You may feel that your partner is not only the source of your trouble, but the sole source of your security, love, and material comfort as well.
- **Self-criticism:** When your partner loses his temper, you blame yourself... even when you've tried your hardest to keep the peace. You believe that it is *your* responsibility to find a way to avoid the fights.



- **Isolation:** You feel cut off from other people... and you probably are. You may be ashamed of the way you live but you can't believe anyone else would understand.
- **Denial of self:** You put your own dreams and preferences out of the picture and instead concentrate on keeping the peace at home. You pour your energy into keeping your partner calm... a never-ending job. You accept his attitude that he's the only one who counts.
- **Defensiveness of your partner:** You make excuses for the abuser: it's only when he's stressed out, or the drink makes him like that, or he was brought up that way, etc.

Women don't do this because they actually like the man's behavior; it's usually because the woman feels that she *must* maintain the relationship, so she must convince herself (and others) that he's not really a bad person. The fact is that you may be very close when he's not violent, and that pushes you toward believing that you can handle the violence in order to save the relationship.

- **Difficulty with new tasks and new information:** Similar to what an abused child goes through, the woman who lives with violence loses some of her resilience and readiness to adapt to new people or situations.

What does that mean in real life? It means that, when starting a new job or taking a course of some kind, you just can't seem to focus the way you want so that you can be successful at what you're trying to do.

- **Depression:** As a battered woman, you must keep a tight lid on your emotions; you often feel trapped; you may turn to alcohol or sedative drugs. *All of these reactions contribute to the development of serious depression.* The depression, in turn, causes you to feel hopeless, helpless, and unable to cope with life.

End of sample pages. There are 16 total pages in this title.

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