



WHY DIDN'T YOU LEAVE?

alternatively titled

WHY DID YOU GO BACK?

or

WHY DON'T YOU LEAVE?

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The [victim of domestic violence] appears to be a full participant, a consenting adult, a collaborator. So it seems, but in any relationship with a violent person, there can be no such thing as full and *equal* participation. What the battered woman participates in, as best she can, is an effort to regain the relationship she once had and hopes to have again — Didn't he promise? — the relationship *without* the violence. Trying to save a marriage, or save her life, or save her children, a battered woman may submit to violence, just as a rape victim may submit to rape for fear of being killed. But submission is not consent.

Anne Jones, Next Time, She'll be Dead: Battering and How to Stop it, Boston: Beacon Press, 1994, pp. 126-127.

The question "Why didn't you leave?" often offends victims of domestic abuse. It seems to blame the victim, rather than the perpetrator. It presumes that the victim was more wrong for staying than the perpetrator was for entrapping and hurting her. Often the question is asked out of bewilderment; the questioner is not familiar with the dynamics of abuse and simply cannot understand why any person would remain in an abusive relationship. At times this bewilderment comes across to the victim as exasperation (and therefore as judgement) — in which case the victim feels that the questioner has no genuine desire to understand. If you have ever felt like asking this question, or if you have even been asked it, here are some answers to "Why didn't you leave?" Of course, not all these reasons will apply to every victim, but many victims will identify with a large number of them.

Lack of identification of the problem

- I was unsure about what "abuse" was.
- I sought help from my doctor but he didn't identify the problem as domestic violence; he just gave me antidepressants or tranquillisers for my "nerves".
- I don't think my situation is "domestic violence". I don't like that term.
- I thought: "He doesn't beat me up, so I'm not a victim of domestic violence."
- I didn't want to admit that I had been entrapped into the relationship.
- For a long time I was too frightened to admit that it was domestic violence. To admit it would mean I had to do something about leaving.
- I was diagnosed with post-natal depression. Nobody saw that the major problem (the real cause) was abuse.

Illness and lack of energy

- I was too hurt by everything to be able to work out what to do. I didn't have the energy.
- I was too sick from all the stress of the abuse.
- My kids were sick and I had to put them first.
- I am too old and weak to leave now.

The children

- I was trying to protect my children from all the stresses of a separation and divorce.
- My children were having learning difficulties and I didn't want to disrupt their schooling.
- I thought the children needed their father. They loved him.
- It always seemed like a bad time to leave — somebody's birthday, Christmas time, etc.
- I thought a violent father was better than no father at all.
- He had threatened to have sex with our daughter if I refused him sex. I thought that by staying under the same roof with him I could protect her. (I found out much later he had been violating her anyway.)
- I was frightened because he said he would take the children off me.
- My (adult) children do not want me to break up their inheritance.

I believed in being committed to marriage

- I was committed to my marriage. I took "till death do us part" very seriously.
- I had made an inner vow never to break my marriage vows.
- I am hardworking; I thought, "I can work at this."

The relationship had some good parts

- I still loved my husband. Sometimes he was really nice to me.
- I didn't want the marriage to end; I just wanted the abuse to stop.
- I thought, "I'll never find anyone better."
- I thought, "A little love is better than no love at all."

I had compassion for my spouse

- I thought the problem was his drinking, or his mental illness; I felt sorry for him because he was "sick". I didn't realise the problem was he was an abuser.
- He needed me to be there so he could manage the rest of his life.
- He said he would kill himself if I left.
- I thought if I stayed I could help him get better.
- I am loyal; I was conscious of the damage it would do to his reputation.
- My own best qualities (like my empathy and caring) were used as weapons against me.¹
- I was going to leave; then he became terminally ill and now I feel trapped. I can't leave him; I would feel too guilty; so I am his full-time carer now.
- The community I live in is so small that I am frightened of seeking help — the gossip, and my husband hearing about it, is too risky.

Traumatic attachment

- My spouse had convinced me that it was all my fault.
- I thought I was going crazy. I didn't know what was right or wrong any more, and had lost my sense of self. I looked to him for reassurance, love and leadership.

- The emotional pain I felt when I left seemed worse than the pain I felt when I stayed in the abuse and buried my feelings.

Shame

- I was ashamed to admit that the man I had married and had children with was terrorising me.
- The realisation that it was domestic violence killed me inside; I was still walking but was only a shell.

Terror

- I could not bear to see him wreck everything in the house (and the house itself), which he had started to do last time I left.
- I thought my spouse might kill me if I left.

Disbelief or bad advice from others

- When I told people about the abuse, they didn't believe me.
- I had concealed my pain and injuries for so long that, when I told people about them, they did not believe me.
- I was told by the church that I shouldn't divorce.
- My minister told me to go back, pray, and submit more.

Lack of support from others

- I had no support from anyone.
- When I tried to seek help about the abuse, people treated me like I was a leper or something.
- The ladies in my bible study ignored me when I tried to tell them about my problem, so I felt friendless.
- My family were not helpful; they told me what to do, instead of helping me work it out for myself and supporting me in my decisions.
- My family got so sick of me leaving and going back to him that in the end they wiped their hands of me.
- My (immigrant) community told me I was picking up ideas from the "Western" way of life that were not appropriate.
- As an older woman, I didn't want to go to an agency that deals with women who are raising children.
- I thought all the workers at the support agency would be young, so they wouldn't understand me as an older woman. (I found out later that this was not true.)

Condemnation from others, and myself

- I thought God would condemn me if I left my marriage.
- I knew some Christians would condemn me if I left my marriage.
- I saw how other women were treated when they spoke up about their abusive marriages.
- I left him, but went back because Christians told me I was a "rebellious wife".

- Christians told me, “A good Christian does not have problems.”
- I didn’t want to live as a single mother.
- I didn’t want to end up in a huddle with other divorced women, where all we did was complain about our ex-husbands and resent life. (That was the image I had of divorcees.)
- Being a widow you get support and sympathy; being divorced you get stigmatised.
- My (adult) children think that I am to blame and that "poor old dad" only drinks because of me and my nerves.
- My priest said, “All you people in the younger generation think about is me, me, me! You are always abandoning your commitments to other people in order to be yourself or find yourself.”²
- My priest said, “You must not be a Christian because you obviously don't believe in the power of the Holy Spirit to change a person.”³

Fear of how I would cope on my own

- I was worried I might not cope on my own.
- I was fearful that the addictions I had prior to the relationship would come back if I left my spouse.
- I had no money.
- I didn’t think I could earn enough to support the children on my own.
- I had no job skills.
- My husband prevented me from upgrading my education to improve my job prospects.
- I have no superannuation and would only have a pension, with no house and no other money.
- I didn’t know there were refuges/ help with finances and housing.
- I didn’t know that I could get a residence visa by the special provisions for domestic violence victims. I thought this country would deport me because I didn’t have a valid visa.

The housing crisis

- Why should I and the kids leave? It’s our house too, our garden too, the kids are settled at school. It’s him who should leave — he’s the criminal! He’s the one who won’t live like a civilised person.
- Our property is jointly owned (or in his name) and I think I would lose it.
- I had nowhere to go.
- When I phoned the crisis line, all the shelters were full.
- I didn’t dare go to a refuge because I thought they were all run by New Age radical lesbian feminists who would see my Christianity as part of the problem, rather than part of the solution. (I found out later this was not true.)
- The refuge had room, but they wouldn’t allow teenage boys.
- I did leave: I went to the shelter, then to a safe house for a short-term tenancy, then they sent me an eviction notice, and I had just had a miscarriage (from the last beating) and felt at the end of my rope, and it was Christmas time... so I went back.

Living in hope: the buy-back

- I lived in hope that the next day would be better.
- I *did* leave, several times, but I went back, because of all the above reasons, and because I was so lonely, poor, homeless, friendless, depressed, and I believed his promises because he was so convincing. The pressure he put on me to reconcile was enormous.

In summary

- The danger of leaving seemed greater than the danger of staying.
- It was easier living with abuse than finding a way through the maze of safety.⁴
- The cost of resisting his demands appeared more damaging than the costs of capitulating to his demands.

Endnotes

¹ "Manna in the Wilderness", Anne Marie Hunter, in *Telling the Truth*, ed. John S. McClure and Nancy J. Ramsay, 1998. Cleveland: United Church Press, p. 137.

² "Manna in the Wilderness", p. 139.

³ *ibid* .

⁴ I am indebted to Betty Taylor of the Gold Coast Domestic Violence Service for this succinct sentence.