

Women's Stay-Leave Decisions in Relationships Involving Intimate Partner Violence ¹

“Why do battered women stay with men who abuse them?” This is probably the question most commonly asked of battered women’s activists, intervention providers, and researchers². However, the question oversimplifies the issue. The author’s position, based on broad knowledge of the research and clinical literature on intimate partner violence (IPV), several years of research experience in the field, and experience on the staff of a battered women’s shelter as a support group facilitator, is that the relationship status of a woman in an abusive relationship is fluid and changeable. This is so because the phenomenon with which she has to cope, her reactions to it, the reactions of others to her situation, and the responsibilities she perceives herself to have to herself and others are very complex and are themselves in flux. The best course of action in one situation may not be best in another; what may be best in the long run may be too unsafe or personally or socially destabilizing in the short run to attempt or perhaps even consider. The goal of the present paper is to improve understanding of abused women’s stay-leave decisions by demonstrating how the characteristics of violent relationships and men who batter their partners, and the implications of these characteristics for decision-making are similar to as well as different from considerations of non-violent partners in non-violent relationships.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) occurs in couples from all segments of society: it knows no socio-economic, racial, ethnic, religious, or sexual orientation bounds. Members of either sex can be the abuser or the abused. However, many sources of data and the experiences of many people who work with victims of abuse indicate that IPV against women by their male partners is by far the

most common type of relationship in which IPV occurs.³ For this reason and because most of the research literature on the dynamics of IPV has focused on IPV perpetrated by men against women, the current article focuses on the decision-making of women who are abused by male partners. Many of the processes and considerations it describes, however, also apply to other romantic dyads in which physical/sexual aggression occurs⁴ as well as to non-violent relationships.

Similarities and Differences in the Complexities of Relationship Dynamics

If we wish to understand why battered women “stay” with men who abuse them, it is important to bear in mind that *people*, of both genders and various sexual orientations, “stay” in relationships that are less than healthy for them beyond the point at which this realization is reached, regardless of whether or not the relationship is a violent one. So, the question, “Why do *people* stay in relationships that are not good for them?” would be a better question to ask. Even this question misses the mark, however, because many people, including most battered women⁵, do end bad relationships eventually.

Part of the reason the flawed question is asked, of course, is the tendency for those who are not themselves in physically abusive relationships to focus only on episodes of physical or sexual abuse when thinking about these relationships and the people in them. Physical and sexual abuse are important as distinguishing, defining characteristics of violent relationships, of course, but they contribute to women’s stay-leave decisions in complex ways and are not the only factors that determine when or if a final break-up will occur. Focusing on abusive acts or episodes, while important for assessing safety, planning interventions, and providing social and legal

redress for victims and their families, tends to cause us to forget, among other lessons from our own experience, that relationships are complex, dynamic, and always “in process.”

Why People Stay. When I speak to audiences trying to understand the stay-leave decisions of women in violent relationships, I ask audience members to think about a relationship they have had or that someone close to them has had that was not good for them, but that was not physically or sexually abusive. I ask them to list all the reasons they stayed in the relationship beyond the point when they knew it was not going to work and that staying was not really good for them. People consistently come up with long lists of reasons that apply both to themselves and their decision processes in these relationships and to victims of IPV. For anyone, ending a romantic relationship, especially once a certain level of commitment has been established (e.g., moving in together and/or marriage, birth of a child), can be a difficult and traumatic process. It is a process that varies from person to person, couple to couple, and is influenced by the socio-cultural setting in which relationships are established and maintained. In the special case of the woman who has been physically abused by her husband or boyfriend, it is not uncommon for her to leave and return many times before severing the relationship permanently.⁶

A common reason people stay in bad relationships for any length of time is that our partners have both good and bad qualities and we have fallen in love with or have great affection for their better selves (or at least the better selves they once presented to us). Even in a well-functioning relationship that is mutually supportive, loving, safe, and satisfying, we must overlook, forgive, and learn to accept the imperfections of our mates. A relationship cannot be maintained if we fail to do this, and we are socialized to do it in

preparation for marriage. The “imperfections” which many people confront, of course, do not tend to the physically damaging and potentially life-threatening. For those of us who have been fortunate not to have experienced a physically abusive relationship, our “bad” relationship stories center around a partner who was emotionally abusive, either in an active way or in a passive, neglectful way, or both, even if we have never labeled the behavior emotional abuse.

Emotional abuse can be relatively “minor” or it can be intense and damaging. It can occur on its own, as many of us have experienced, but it is almost always present in physically (and/or sexually) abusive relationships⁷. Emotionally abusive behavior, like physical abuse, tends to alternate with periods of “good” or at least neutral behavior. We often stay with a person who “does not treat [us] right” for some period of time as we try to persuade, pressure, or cajole him to abandon the “bad” behavior and maximize the good. Many of us have been persuaded by widely available cultural messages to believe that “Love conquers all.” Add to this the fact that, when confronted, the abusive party may be ready with apologies, and promises to change. He may be especially loving and attentive for a while to “make up for” his misdeeds and to prevent his partner from leaving him, but eventually his “bad behavior” returns. All of these factors make it difficult to judge when there really is no hope for behavioral change and relational improvement, and more difficult to sever ties with one’s partner.

Men who physically abuse their partners can be thought of as occupying a more extreme position on a continuum of abuse, but IPV victims experience the same fluctuation between “good guy” and “bad guy,” and the same responses to efforts to change his behavior or end the relationship. In the clinical research literature on