Why Does an Abused Person Stay in an Unhealthy Relationship?

First, we need to ask the larger questions "Why do people abuse?" and "Why do we allow abuse to continue in our society?" Next, we need to recognize that many people do leave or make attempts to leave an abusive relationship. Leaving is not always an event; it is a process. People sometimes make three or four attempts to leave before they leave for good. There are many reasons why victims stay in abusive relationships.

**Society's Attitudes:** When the dominant culture minimizes or ignores violence, it is hard for someone being abused to identify what is happening early on. Phrases like "it's just a lover's quarrel," "everyone has hard times," or "you just like to create drama" minimize acts of violence. Also, the media glamorizes jealousy as a sign of love.

**Fear:** People fear being alone, being on their own, taking care of children alone. They also are afraid of being killed if they attempt to leave. Given their past violence, abusers' threats need to be taken seriously.

**Economic Dependence:** The person may be dependent on the abuser for financial support.

**Parenting Concerns:** The person wants a co-parent for the children.

**Religious Pressure:** Religious institutions may pressure families to stay together. If the couple is married, the person may not see divorce as an option.

**Family Pressures:** The extended family pressures the person to keep the family together.

**Denial:** Abused people tell themselves “it's really not so bad.” They minimize the abuse.

**Low Self-esteem:** Abused people think they deserve the abuse, that they can't find anyone better, and that a little love is better than no love. They don’t feel good about themselves. They may have entered the relationship this way, OR if the abuse has been ongoing, their original healthy self-esteem has now been damaged.

**Guilt and Self-blame:** The abuser blames the abused person for the relationship problems. If the abused person has started to “fight back” badly, the abuser feels justified blaming the abused person.

**Social Status:** If the abuser has high status in the community, the abused person does not want to lose benefits related to being connected to a high status mate.

**Sexual/Gender Status:** The abuser may threaten to out a gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender partner.

**Immigrant Status:** The abused person, if undocumented, may fear deportation.

**HIV Status:** The abuser may threaten to disclose the abused person’s positive HIV status.

**Love:** Often the abuser is loving and lovable when not being abusive. The abuser may offer the partner a “hearts and flowers” cycle, with gifts, promises, and apologies.

**Hope for Change:** Often abused people think abusers will change if they stay with them.

**Shame/Embarrassment:** Abused people don't want anyone to know they are being abused.

**Patterns of abuse:** People who grew up in violent families don't know that non-abusive relationships are possible.

**Isolation:** Abusers isolate the people they abuse from family, friends and other support.

Adapted from Carol Cantwell's revisions 5-15