**Barriers to Leaving**

**Why Abuse Victims Stay**

***For someone who has never experienced family violence, the question of why an abuse victim stays is one of the most difficult to comprehend.***

If lawyers, judges and other service providers are to help stem the tide of homicides and assaults, both physical and psychological, resulting from family violence, it is vital that they understand the many factors that influence the victim’s decision to remain. The following list, while hardly exhaustive, describes some of the barriers to leaving experienced by family violence victims.

**rELATIONSHIP WITH the abuser**

* The abuser holds a prominent position in the community which makes it more difficult for the victim to be heard or believed.
* The abuser is the primary wage earner so the victim may not be able to provide for herself/himself and the children if they leave.
* The victim loves the abuser no matter what they have done and hopes that they will change.
* If they have children, the victim may have concerns about separating them from their father/mother and raising them alone.
* The abuser may blame the abuse on substance abuse issues or job stress, leading the victim to believe that if these problems can be solved, the domestic violence will end.

**Children**

* The abuser threatens to sue for custody of the children—a Massachusetts study found that in 70% of the cases in which a father requested some form of custody, he was successful.
* The victim may believe it is in the children’s best interests to live in a two-parent home.
* Abusers are capable of manipulating children to plead “just let Daddy/Mommy come home!”

**Economic Issues**

* The abuser is the source of income for the family and the victim may not have job skills or financial resources if she/he leaves.
* The abuser may deny the victim access to money or financial records.
* The abuser may prohibit victim from working outside the home or may interfere with victim’s attempts to gain or maintain employment by refusing to allow victim to go to job interviews or by harassing victim at their workplace.

**External Pressures**

* Family members may think there is no excuse for leaving a marriage or may have been deceived by the abuser’s public charm or charisma.
* Religious beliefs may lead victim to think they must tolerate the abuse to adhere to their faith.
* Cultural defenses may be cited by abuser, victim, or other community members; similarly, the victim may feel torn between reporting the abuse and participating in a justice system she/he feels is biased against their ethnic or racial group.

**Past Experiences**

* The abuser may bring up a previous history of abuse that the victim had with another partner that leads the victim to believe the abuser’s claim, “See, this is what you drive your partners to do!”
* Either the abuser’s or the victim’s substance abuse or alcoholism may lead the victim to fear that the children will be removed if she/he seeks help.
* It is estimated that a battered woman is 75% more likely to be murdered when she flees or has fled than when she stays—extensive safety planning is thus essential. The victim knows her/his abuser and may have good reason to fear that the abuser will follow through on their threats against the victim or their children if she/he leaves.
* The abuser’s attempts to maintain power and control over the victim may be bolstered if the victim grew up in an abusive household, has low self-esteem or believes that their experiences are normal behavior.
* Prior negative experiences with the court system may cause the victim to be skeptical of the criminal justice system’s ability or willingness to offer assistance.
* If the police have failed to respond to 911 calls or if they have minimized the victim’s fears and concerns and downplayed the violence when responding to past calls, the victim may see little value in contacting them after further incidents of violence.

**Physical or Logistical Challenges**

* Abusers often isolate victims from friends and family. The victim may not know where to go for help. A victim living in a rural community may be even more isolated from resources such as shelters or domestic violence advocates or public transportation which make it very difficult to leave the abusive situation.
* Physical challenges or disabilities may make it more difficult for the victim to access services and can also compound feelings of isolation.
* People with developmental disabilities are particularly vulnerable to manipulation by an abuser and, if their abuser is their caregiver, they are dependent on their abuser for basic survival.
* An older adult victim may be more dependent on their abuser for care and may fear being placed in a nursing home if they leave the abuser. Moreover, elderly victims tend to hold more traditional beliefs about marriage and may not believe that divorce is an option for them.
* Medical problems may cause the victim to stay with the abuser in order to maintain insurance coverage.
* The abuser may control the victim’s source of transportation and so the victim may not have any means of access to child care or their job if they leave.
* Lack of affordable housing or shelter that can accommodate the victim and their children as well as family pets can lead a victim to feel that there is literally no place for them to go.

**Other Considerations**

* The victim may be unaware that abuse constitutes a criminal offense, or that services that could help the victim are available in the community.
* Any number of special circumstances can affect a victim’s willingness to leave. Spouses of military servicemen, spouses of law enforcement officers, members of the gay and lesbian community, previously incarcerated victims on parole, illiterate victims, and undocumented alien residents are all examples of victims who may face unique obstacles to leaving their abusive relationship.

*Adapted from Sarah M. Buel, “Fifty Obstacles to Leaving, a.k.a., Why Abuse Victims Stay,” The Colorado Lawyer vol. 28, no. 10 (Oct. 1999), pp.19-28*

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