Abused Women – Why Do They Stay?

Synopsis

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This thesis opens with the author’s personal story that details the night that led to the arrest of her abusive husband.

I did not stab him. Though it would have ended the matter a little more efficiently, had self-defense been an acceptable plea. I had almost wished that he was an alcoholic or a drug user so I could see a reason for his violent outbreaks. Our marriage therapist, after seeing my husband privately, had said, “I’m sorry. When I look into those dark eyes I see nothing, no emotion, no empathy, no heart. I wonder if he even has a soul. So my goal now is to work on you and to help you regain your self-esteem. … Bam, his fist pounded me in the jaw. Caught off guard, I crashed to the floor, my face stinging from the blow, the salty taste of blood in my mouth. I dodged his powerful kicks as I staggered to my feet and towards the wall phone and grabbed the receiver. … stumbled for the front door. With my wailing daughter clutched to my chest, I fumbled for the keys and bolted out the door, into the darkness, pushing through the hedges towards my neighbor’s brightly lit house, a telephone, and the police—safety. … How had I come to this? Why was an intelligent, beautiful woman a part of something so ugly? Why did I stay as long as I had?

“Why do they stay?” is a question that is usually asked with a tone of disdain. In my attempt to shed light on that question by interviewing women similar to myself
who experienced abuse, I found that, although the reasons may vary from person to person, the underlying root of the problem is low self-esteem. Self-esteem is defined as confidence and satisfaction in oneself. The lack of it creates a vulnerability that causes a woman to act in ways that are not beneficial to her well-being. Her sense of inadequacy causes her to believe that she is powerless and helpless to remedy her situation, which traps her in an abusive relationship. Women may stay because of denial, an abusive family history, embarrassment, financial concerns, or fear of the “broken home,” but if they had strong self-confidence they may have risen above these rationales.

The first section on denial introduces the reader to three female victims of domestic violence: Ann, an executive administrator, Debra, a director of a women’s imaging center, and Kathy, formerly a stay-at-home mom. It features quotes from these women that highlight the extent of their denial of reality to their abuse while they were experiencing it and now after they have survived it.

The second section illustrates how constant verbal abuse and putdowns erode at a person’s self-image. The correlation of being raised in an abusive family to becoming a victim or perpetrator of domestic violence later in life is shown in this section. Adult relationships can be shaped by childhood experiences of violence. A tolerance of violence can follow a person into adulthood.

The third section on shame and embarrassment opens with a view of a domestic violence support group. It serves as an example of the varied demographics
of abused women and focuses on a common reason that professional, educated women give for staying in abusive relationships. Observations of psychologists are also cited.

Financial concerns, especially where children are concerned, are explored in the fourth section. Quotes from a divorce attorney and other researchers are included. Two of the women interviewed also mentioned how supporting themselves factored into their decision to remain with their abusers longer than they should have.

The fifth section shows how the fear of the broken home can cause a woman to stay. Many women are fearful of becoming welfare recipients. The effects on children who witness domestic violence are also discussed. An abused mother’s remarks regarding her grown daughter are featured.

The reasons that comprise the five sections all tie into the root reason women stay with their abusers, which is low self-esteem. The level of self-confidence and self-respect that a woman possesses relates directly to how long she remains in an abusive situation. Each beating serves to reinforce the abused woman’s negative self-image. Battered women are overwhelmed by feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness. It is also noted how this does not necessarily invade their professional lives and careers.

The last section discusses the lessons learned by the three interviewees. They also mention their turning points that signaled when it was time to leave their abusers for good.
The conclusion stresses how low self-esteem is linked to the five reasons. The cycle of abuse starts with verbal and emotional battering that gradually erodes a woman’s self-confidence to the point that she becomes “brainwashed” into believing that she can never make it on her own. The reason why women stay when the abuse escalates to physical beatings becomes clearer once you understand the pattern of abuse.

The epilogue explains the circumstances of how the interviewees left their abusers. The reader is also updated on the status of these women today.