

Love and Stockholm Syndrome: The Mystery of Loving an Abuser

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People are often amazed at their own psychological conditions and reactions. Those with depression are stunned when they remember they've thought of killing themselves. Patients recovering from severe psychiatric disturbances are often shocked as they remember their symptoms and behavior during the episode. A patient with Bipolar Disorder recently told me "I can't believe I thought I could change the weather through mental telepathy!" A common reaction is "I can't believe I did that!"

In clinical practice, some of the most surprised and shocked individuals are those who have been involved in controlling and abusive relationships. When the relationship ends, they offer comments such as "I know what he's done to me, but I still love him", "I don't know why, but I want him back", or "I know it sounds crazy, but I miss her". Recently I've heard "This doesn't make sense. He's got a new girlfriend and he's abusing her too...but I'm jealous!" Friends and relatives are even more amazed and shocked when they hear these comments or witness their loved one returning to an abusive relationship. While the situation doesn't make sense from a social standpoint, does it make sense from a psychological viewpoint? The answer is - Yes!

On August 23rd, 1973 two machine-gun carrying criminals entered a bank in Stockholm, Sweden. Blasting their guns, one prison escapee named Jan-Erik Olsson announced to the terrified bank employees "The party has just begun!" The two bank robbers held four hostages, three women and one man, for the next 131 hours. The hostages were strapped with dynamite and held in a bank vault until finally rescued on August 28th.

After their rescue, the hostages exhibited a shocking attitude considering they were threatened, abused, and feared for their lives for over five days. In their media interviews, it was clear that they supported their captors and actually feared law enforcement personnel who came to their rescue. The hostages had begun to feel the captors were actually protecting them from the police. One woman later became engaged to one of the criminals and another developed a legal defense fund to aid in their criminal defense fees. Clearly, the hostages had "bonded" emotionally with their captors.

While the psychological condition in hostage situations became known as "Stockholm Syndrome" due to the publicity – the emotional "bonding" with captors was a familiar story in psychology. It had been recognized many years before and was found in studies of other hostage, prisoner, or abusive situations such as:

- Abused Children
- Battered/Abused Women
- Prisoners of War
- Cult Members
- Incest Victims
- Criminal Hostage Situations
- Concentration Camp Prisoners
- Controlling/Intimidating Relationships

In the final analysis, emotionally bonding with an abuser is actually a strategy for survival for victims of abuse and intimidation. The “Stockholm Syndrome” reaction in hostage and/or abuse situations is so well recognized at this time that police hostage negotiators no longer view it as unusual. In fact, it is often encouraged in crime situations as it improves the chances for survival of the hostages. On the down side, it also assures that the hostages experiencing “Stockholm Syndrome” will not be very cooperative during rescue or criminal prosecution. Local law enforcement personnel have long recognized this syndrome with battered women who fail to press charges, bail their battering husband/boyfriend out of jail, and even physically attack police officers when they arrive to rescue them from a violent assault.

Stockholm Syndrome (SS) can also be found in family, romantic, and interpersonal relationships. The abuser may be a husband or wife, boyfriend or girlfriend, father or mother, or any other role in which the abuser is in a position of control or authority.

It's important to understand the components of Stockholm Syndrome as they relate to abusive and controlling relationships. Once the syndrome is understood, it's easier to understand why victims support, love, and even defend their abusers and controllers.

Every syndrome has symptoms or behaviors and Stockholm Syndrome is no exception. While a clear-cut list has not been established due to varying opinions by researchers and experts, several of these features will be present:

- Positive feelings by the victim toward the abuser/controller
- Negative feelings by the victim toward family, friends, or authorities trying to rescue/support them or win their release
- Support of the abuser's reasons and behaviors
- Positive feelings by the abuser toward the victim
- Supportive behaviors by the victim, at times helping the abuser
- Inability to engage in behaviors that may assist in their release or detachment

Stockholm Syndrome doesn't occur in every hostage or abusive situation. In another bank robbery involving hostages, after terrorizing patrons and employees for many hours, a police sharpshooter shot and wounded the terrorizing bank robber. After he hit the floor, two women picked him up and physically held him up to the window for another shot. As you can see, the length of time one is exposed to abuse/control and other factors are certainly involved.

It has been found that four situations or conditions are present that serve as a foundation for the development of Stockholm Syndrome. These four situations can be found in hostage, severe abuse, and abusive relationships:

- The presence of a perceived threat to one's physical or psychological survival and the belief that the abuser would carry out the threat.
- The presence of a perceived small kindness from the abuser to the victim
- Isolation from perspectives other than those of the abuser
- The perceived inability to escape the situation

By considering each situation we can understand how Stockholm Syndrome develops in romantic relationships as well as criminal/hostage situations. Looking at each situation:

Perceived threat to one's physical/psychological survival

The perception of threat can be formed by direct, indirect, or witnessed methods. Criminal or antisocial partners can directly threaten your life or the life of friends and family. Their history of violence leads us to believe that the captor/controller will carry out the threat in a direct manner if we fail to comply with their demands. The abuser assures us that only our cooperation keeps our loved ones safe.

Indirectly, the abuser/controller offers subtle threats that you will never leave them or have another partner, reminding you that people in the past have paid dearly for not following their wishes. Hints are often offered such as "I know people who can make others disappear". Indirect threats also come from the stories told by the abuser or controller – how they obtained revenge on those who have crossed them in the past. These stories of revenge are told to remind the victim that revenge is possible if they leave.

Witnessing violence or aggression is also a perceived threat. Witnessing a violent temper directed at a television set, others on the highway, or a third party clearly sends us the message that we could be the next target for violence. Witnessing the thoughts and attitudes of the abuser/controller is threatening and intimidating, knowing that we will be the target of those thoughts in the future.

The "Small Kindness" Perception

In threatening and survival situations, we look for evidence of hope – a small sign that the situation may improve. When an abuser/controller shows the victim some small kindness, even though it is to the abusers benefit as well, the victim interprets that small kindness as a positive trait of the captor. In criminal/war hostage situations, letting the victim live is often enough. Small behaviors, such as allowing a bathroom visit or providing food/water, are enough to strengthen the Stockholm Syndrome in criminal hostage events.

In relationships with abusers, a birthday card, a gift (usually provided after a period of abuse), or a special treat are interpreted as not only positive, but evidence that the abuser is not "all bad" and may at some time correct his/her behavior. Abusers and controllers are often given positive credit for not abusing their partner, when the partner would have normally been subjected to verbal or physical abuse in a certain situation. An aggressive and jealous partner may normally become intimidating or abusive in certain social situations, as when an opposite-sex coworker waves in a crowd. After seeing the wave, the victim expects to be verbally battered and when it doesn't happen, that "small kindness" is interpreted as a positive sign.

Similar to the small kindness perception is the perception of a "soft side". During the relationship, the abuser/controller may share information about their past – how they were mistreated, abused, neglected, or wronged. The victim begins to feel the abuser/controller may be capable of fixing their behavior or worse yet, that they (abuser) may also be a "victim". Sympathy may develop toward the abuser and we often hear the victim of Stockholm Syndrome defending their abuser with "I know he fractured my jaw and ribs...but he's troubled. He had a rough childhood!" Losers and abusers may admit they need psychiatric help or acknowledge they are mentally disturbed, however, it's almost always after they have already abused or intimidated the victim. The

admission is a way of denying responsibility for the abuse. In truth, personality disorders and criminals have learned over the years that personal responsibility for their violent/abusive behaviors can be minimized and even denied by blaming their bad upbringing, abuse as a child, and now - video games. One murderer blamed his crime on eating too much junk food – now known as the “Twinkie Defense”. While it may be true that the abuser/controller had a difficult upbringing – showing sympathy for his/her history produces no change in their behavior and in fact, prolongs the length of time you will be abused. While “sad stories” are always included in their apologies – after the abusive/controlling event - their behavior never changes! Keep in mind; once you become hardened to the “sad stories”, they will simply try another approach. I know of no victim of abuse or crime who has heard their abuser say "I'm beating (robbing, mugging, etc.) you because my Mom hated me!"

Isolation from Perspectives Other than those of the Captor

In abusive and controlling relationships, the victim has the sense they are always “walking on eggshells” – fearful of saying or doing anything that might prompt a violent/intimidating outburst. For their survival, they begin to see the world through the abuser’s perspective. They begin to fix things that might prompt an outburst, act in ways they know makes the abuser happy, or avoid aspects of their own life that may prompt a problem. If we only have a dollar in our pocket, then most of our decisions become financial decisions. If our partner is an abuser or controller, then the majority of our decisions are based on our perception of the abuser’s potential reaction. We become preoccupied with the needs, desires, and habits of the abuser/controller.

Taking the abuser’s perspective as a survival technique can become so intense that the victim actually develops anger toward those trying to help them. The abuser is already angry and resentful toward anyone who would provide the victim support, typically using multiple methods and manipulations to isolate the victim from others. Any contact the victim has with supportive people in the community is met with accusations, threats, and/or violent outbursts. Victims then turn on their family – fearing family contact will cause additional violence and abuse in the home. At this point, victims curse their parents and friends, tell them not to call and stop interfering, and break off communication with others. Agreeing with the abuser/controller, supportive others are now viewed as “causing trouble” and must be avoided. Many victims threaten their family and friends with restraining orders if they continue to “interfere” or try to help the victim in their situation. On the surface it would appear that they have sided with the abuser/controller. In truth, they are trying to minimize contact situation that might make them a target of additional verbal abuse or intimidation. If a casual phone call from Mom prompts a two-hour temper outburst with threats and accusations – the victim quickly realizes it’s safer if Mom stops calling. If simply telling Mom to stop calling doesn’t work, for his or her own safety the victim may accuse Mom of attempting to ruin the relationship and demand that she stop calling.

In severe cases of Stockholm Syndrome in relationships, the victim may have difficulty leaving the abuser and may actually feel the abusive situation is their fault. In law enforcement situations, the victim may actually feel the arrest of their partner for physical abuse or battering is their fault. Some women will allow their children to be removed by child protective agencies rather than give up the relationship with their abuser. As they take the perspective of the abuser, the children are at fault – they complained about the situation, they brought the attention of authorities to the home, and they put the adult relationship at risk. Sadly, the children have now become a danger to the victim’s safety. For those with Stockholm Syndrome, allowing the children to be removed from the home

decreases their victim stress while providing an emotionally and physically safer environment for the children.

Perceived Inability to Escape

As a hostage in a bank robbery, threatened by criminals with guns, it's easy to understand the perceived inability to escape. In romantic relationships, the belief that one can't escape is also very common. Many abusive/controlling relationships feel like till-death-do-us-part relationships – locked together by mutual financial issues/assets, mutual intimate knowledge, or legal situations. Here are some common situations:

- Controlling partners have increased the financial obligations/debt in the relationship to the point that neither partner can financially survive on their own. Controllers who sense their partner may be leaving will often purchase a new automobile, later claiming they can't pay alimony or child support due to their large car payments.
- The legal ending of a relationship, especially a marital relationship, often creates significant problems. A Controller who has an income that is "under the table" or maintained through legally questionable situations runs the risk of those sources of income being investigated or made public by the divorce/separation. The Controller then becomes more agitated about the possible public exposure of their business arrangements than the loss of the relationship.
- The Controller often uses extreme threats including threatening to take the children out of state, threatening to quit their job/business rather than pay alimony/support, threatening public exposure of the victim's personal issues, or assuring the victim they will never have a peaceful life due to nonstop harassment. In severe cases, the Controller may threaten an action that will undercut the victim's support such as "I'll see that you lose your job" or "I'll have your automobile burned".
- Controllers often keep the victim locked into the relationship with severe guilt – threatening suicide if the victim leaves. The victim hears "I'll kill myself in front of the children", "I'll set myself on fire in the front yard", or "Our children won't have a father/mother if you leave me!"
- In relationships with an abuser or controller, the victim has also experienced a loss of self-esteem, self-confidence, and psychological energy. The victim may feel "burned out" and too depressed to leave. Additionally, abusers and controllers often create a type of dependency by controlling the finances, placing automobiles/homes in their name, and eliminating any assets or resources the victim may use to leave. In clinical practice I've heard "I'd leave but I can't even get money out of the savings account! I don't know the PIN number."
- In teens and young adults, victims may be attracted to a controlling individual when they feel inexperienced, insecure, and overwhelmed by a change in their life situation. When parents are going through a divorce, a teen may attach to a controlling individual, feeling the controller may stabilize their life. Freshmen in college may be attracted to controlling individuals who promise to help them survive living away from home on a college campus.

In unhealthy relationships and definitely in Stockholm Syndrome there is a daily preoccupation with "trouble". Trouble is any individual, group, situation, comment, casual glance, or cold meal that may produce a temper tantrum or verbal abuse from the controller or abuser. To survive, "trouble" is to be avoided at all costs. The victim must control situations that produce trouble. That may include avoiding

family, friends, co-workers, and anyone who may create “trouble” in the abusive relationship. The victim does not hate family and friends; they are only avoiding “trouble”! The victim also cleans the house, calms the children, scans the mail, avoids certain topics, and anticipates every issue of the controller or abuse in an effort to avoid “trouble”. In this situation, children who are noisy become “trouble”. Loved ones and friends are sources of “trouble” for the victim who is attempting to avoid verbal or physical aggression.

Stockholm Syndrome in relationships is not uncommon. Law enforcement professionals are painfully aware of the situation – making a domestic dispute one of the high-risk calls during the work hours. Called by neighbors during a spousal abuse incident, the abuser is passive upon arrival of the police, only to find the abused spouse upset and threatening the officers if their abusive partner is arrested for domestic violence. In truth, the victim knows the abuser/controller will retaliate against him/her if 1) they encourage an arrest, 2) they offer statements about the abuse/fight that are deemed disloyal by the abuser, 3) they don't bail them out of jail as quickly as possible, and 4) they don't personally apologize for the situation – as though it was their fault.

Stockholm Syndrome produces an unhealthy bond with the controller and abuser. It is the reason many victims continue to support an abuser after the relationship is over. It's also the reason they continue to see “the good side” of an abusive individual and appear sympathetic to someone who has mentally and sometimes physically abused them.

Is There Something Else Involved?

In a short response – Yes! Throughout history, people have found themselves supporting and participating in life situations that range from abusive to bizarre. In talking to these active and willing participants in bad and bizarre situations, it is clear they have developed feelings and attitudes that support their participation. One way these feelings and thoughts are developed is known as “cognitive dissonance”. As you can tell, psychologists have large words and phrases for just about everything.

“Cognitive Dissonance” explains how and why people change their ideas and opinions to support situations that do not appear to be healthy, positive, or normal. In the theory, an individual seeks to reduce information or opinions that make him or her uncomfortable. When we have two sets of cognitions (knowledge, opinion, feelings, input from others, etc.) that are the opposite, the situation becomes emotionally uncomfortable. Even though we might find ourselves in a foolish or difficult situation – few want to admit that fact. Instead, we attempt to reduce the dissonance - the fact that our cognitions don't match, agree, or make sense when combined. “Cognitive Dissonance” can be reduced by adding new cognitions – adding new thoughts and attitudes. Some examples:

- Heavy smokers know smoking causes lung cancer and multiple health risks. To continue smoking, the smoker changes his cognitions (thoughts/feelings) such as 1) “I'm smoking less than ten years ago”, 2) “I'm smoking low-tar cigarettes”, 3) “Those statistics are made up by the cancer industry conspiracy”, or 4) “Something's got to get you anyway!” These new cognitions/attitudes allow them to keep smoking and actually begin blaming restaurants for being unfair.
- You purchase a \$40,000.00 Sport Utility Vehicle that gets 8 miles a gallon. You justify the expense and related issues with 1) “It's great on trips (you take one trip per year)”, 2) “I can use it to haul stuff (one coffee table in 12 months), and 3) “You can carry a lot of people in it (95% of your trips are driver-only).”

- Your husband/boyfriend becomes abusive and assaultive. You can't leave due to the finances, children, or other factors. Through cognitive dissonance, you begin telling yourself "He only hits me open-handed" and "He's had a lot of stress at work."

Leon Festinger first coined "Cognitive Dissonance". He had observed a cult (1956) in which members gave up their homes, incomes, and jobs to work for the cult. This cult believed in messages from outer space that predicted the day the world would end by a flood. As cult members and firm believers, they believed they would be saved by flying saucers at the appointed time. As they gathered and waited to be taken by flying saucers at the specified time, the end-of-the-world came and went. No flood and no flying saucer! Rather than believing they were foolish after all that personal and emotional investment – they decided their beliefs had actually saved the world from the flood and they became firmer in their beliefs after the failure of the prophecy. The moral – the more you invest (income, job, home, time, effort, etc.) the stronger your need to justify your position. If we invest \$5.00 in a raffle ticket, we justify losing with "I'll get them next time". If you invest everything you have, it requires an almost unreasoning belief and unusual attitude to support and justify that investment.

Studies tell us we are more loyal and committed to something that is difficult, uncomfortable, and even humiliating. The initiation rituals of college fraternities, Marine boot camp, and graduate school all produce loyal and committed individuals. Almost any ordeal creates a bonding experience. Every couple, no matter how mismatched, falls in love in the movies after going through a terrorist takeover, being stalked by a killer, being stranded on an island, or being involved in an alien abduction. Investment and an ordeal are ingredients for a strong bonding – even if the bonding is unhealthy. No one bonds or falls in love by being a member of the Automobile Club or a music CD club. Struggling to survive on a deserted island – you bet!

Abusive relationships produce a great amount on unhealthy investment in both parties. In many cases we tend to remain and support the abusive relationship due to our investment in the relationship. Try telling a new Marine that since he or she has survived boot camp, they should now enroll in the National Guard! Several types of investments keep us in the bad relationship:

- Emotional Investment – We've invested so many emotions, cried so much, and worried so much that we feel we must see the relationship through to the finish.
- Social Investment – We've got our pride! To avoid social embarrassment and uncomfortable social situations, we remain in the relationship.
- Family Investments – If children are present in the relationship, decisions regarding the relationship are clouded by the status and needs of the children.
- Financial Investment – In many cases, the controlling and abusive partner has created a complex financial situation. Many victims remain in a bad relationship, waiting for a better financial situation to develop that would make their departure and detachment easier.
- Lifestyle Investment – Many controlling/abusive partners use money or a lifestyle as an investment. Victims in this situation may not want to lose their current lifestyle.
- Intimacy Investment – We often invest emotional and sexual intimacy. Some victims have experienced a destruction of their emotional and/or sexual self-esteem in the unhealthy relationship. The abusing partner may threaten to spread rumors or tell intimate details or secrets. A type of blackmail using intimacy is often found in these situations.

In many cases, it's not simply our feelings for an individual that keeps us in an unhealthy relationship - it's often the amount of investment. Relationships are complex and we often only see the tip of the iceberg in public. For this reason, the most common phrase offered by the victim in defense of their unhealthy relationship is "You just don't understand!"

Combining Two Unhealthy Conditions

The combination of "Stockholm Syndrome" and "cognitive dissonance" produces a victim who firmly believes the relationship is not only acceptable, but also desperately needed for their survival. The victim feels they would mentally collapse if the relationship ended. In long-term relationships, the victims have invested everything and placed "all their eggs in one basket". The relationship now decides their level of self-esteem, self-worth, and emotional health.

For reasons described above, the victim feels family and friends are a threat to the relationship and eventually to their personal health and existence. The more family/friends protest the controlling and abusive nature of the relationship, the more the victim develops cognitive dissonance and becomes defensive. At this point, family and friends become victims of the abusive and controlling individual.

Importantly, both Stockholm Syndrome and cognitive dissonance develop on an involuntary basis. The victim does not purposely invent this attitude. Both develop as an attempt to exist and survive in a threatening and controlling environment and relationship. Despite what we might think, our loved one is not in the unhealthy relationship to irritate, embarrass, or drive us to drink. What might have began as a normal relationship has turned into a controlling and abusive situation. They are trying to survive. Their personality is developing the feelings and thoughts needed to survive the situation and lower their emotional and physical risks. All of us have developed attitudes and feelings that help us accept and survive situations. We have these attitudes/feelings about our jobs, our community, and other aspects of our life. As we have found throughout history, the more dysfunctional the situation, the more dysfunctional our adaptation and thoughts to survive. The victim is engaged in an attempt to survive and make a relationship work. Once they decide it doesn't work and can't be fixed, they will need our support as we patiently await their decision to return to a healthy and positive lifestyle.

Family and Friends of the Victim

When a family is confronted with a loved one involved with a Loser or controlling/abusive individual, the situation becomes emotionally painful and socially difficult for the family. While each situation is different, some general guidelines to consider are:

- Your loved one, the "victim" of the Loser/Abuser, has probably been given a choice - the relationship or the family. This choice is made more difficult by the control and intimidation often present in abusive/controlling relationships. Knowing that choosing the family will result in severe personal and social consequences, the family always comes in second. Keep in mind that the victim knows in their heart the family will always love them and accept their return – whenever the return happens.

- Remember, the more you pressure the "victim" of the Loser/Abuser, the more you prove their point. Your loved one is being told the family is trying to ruin their wonderful relationship. Pressure in the form of contacts, comments, and communications will be used as evidence against you. An invitation to a Tupperware party is met with "You see! They just want to get you by yourself so they can tell you bad

things about me!" Increasing your contacts is viewed as "putting pressure" on their relationship – not being lovingly concerned.

- Your contacts with your loved one, no matter how routine and loving, may be met with anger and resentment. This is because each contact may prompt the Loser/Abuser to attack them verbally or emotionally. Imagine getting a four-hour lecture every time your Aunt Gladys calls. In a short time, you become angry each time she calls, knowing what the contact will produce in your home. The longer Aunt Gladys talks – the longer your lecture becomes! Thus, when Aunt Gladys calls, you want to get her off the phone as quickly as possible.

- The 1980's song, "Hold on Loosely", maybe the key to a good family and friend approach. Holding on too tight produces more pressure. When the victim is out of the home, it's often best to establish predictable, scheduled contacts. Calling every Wednesday evening, just for a status report or to go over current events, is less threatening than random calls during the week. Random calls are always viewed as "checking up on us" calls. While you may encounter an answering machine, leave a polite and loving message. Importantly, don't discuss the relationship (the controller may be listening!) unless the victim brings it up. The goal of these scheduled calls is to maintain contact, remind your loved one that you are always there to help, and to quietly remind the controller that family and loved ones are nearby and haven't disappeared.

- Try to maintain traditional and special contacts with your loved one - holidays, special occasions, etc. Keep your contacts short and brief, with no comments that can be used as evidence. Contacts made at "traditional" times – holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, etc. – are not as threatening to a controller/abuser. Contacts that provide information, but not questions, are also not as threatening. An example might be a simple card reading "Just a note to let you know that your brother landed a new job this week. You might see him on a Wal-Mart commercial any day now. Love, Mom and Dad". This approach allows the victim to recognize that the family is there - waiting in the wings if needed. It also lessens the lectures/tantrums provided by the Loser as the contacts are on a traditional and expected basis. It's also hard to be angry about brother's new job without looking ridiculous. Also, don't invent holidays or send a reminder that it's Sigmund Freud's birthday. That's suspicious...even in my family.

- Remember that there are many channels of communication. It's important that we keep a channel open if at all possible. Communication channels might include phone calls, letters, cards, and e-mail. Scheduled monthly shopping trips or outings are helpful if possible. The goal is to maintain contact while your loved one is involved in the controlling/abusive relationship. Remember, the goal is contact, not pressure.

- Don't feel the victim's behavior is against the family or friends. It may be a form of survival or a way of lowering stress. Victims may be very resistive, angry, and even hostile due to the complexity of their relationship with the controller/abuser. They may even curse, threaten, and accuse loved ones and friends. This hostile defensiveness is actually self-protection in the relationship – an attempt to avoid "trouble".

- The victim needs to know and feel they are not rejected because of their behavior. Keep in mind, they are painfully aware of their situation. They know they are being treated badly and/or controlled by their partner. Frequent reminders of this will only make them want less contact. We naturally avoid people who remind us of things or situations that are emotionally painful.

- Victims may slightly open the door and provide information about their relationship or hint they may be considering leaving. When the door opens, don't jump through with the Marines behind you! Listen and

simply offer support such as "You know your family is behind any decision you need to make and at any time you make it." They may be exploring what support is available but may not be ready to call in the troops just yet. Many victims use an "exit plan" that may take months or even years to complete. They may be gathering information at this point, not yet ready for an exit.

- We can get messages to people in two ways - the pipeline and the grapevine. The pipeline is face-to-face, telling the person directly. This seldom happens in Loser situations as controllers and abusers monitor and control contacts with others. However, the grapevine is still open. When we use the grapevine, we send a message to our loved one through another person. Victims of controlling and abusive individuals are often allowed to maintain a relationship with a few people, perhaps a sibling or best friend. We can send our loved one a message through that contact person, a message that voices our understanding and support. We don't send insults ("Bill is such a jerk!") or put-downs ("If he doesn't get out of this relationship he'll end up crazy!") - we send messages of love and support. We send "I hope she/he (victim) knows the family is concerned and that we love and support them." Comments sent on the grapevine are phrased with the understanding that our loved one will hear them in that manner. Don't talk with a grapevine contact to express anger and threaten to hire a hit man, and then try to send a message of loving support. Be careful what and how the message is provided. The grapevine contact can often get messages to the victim when we can't. It's another way of letting them know we're supporting them, just waiting to help if and when needed.

- Each situation is different. The family may need to seek counseling support in the community. A family consultation with a mental health professional or attorney may be helpful if the situation becomes legally complex or there is a significant danger of harm.

- As relatives or friends of a victim involved with a controller or abuser, our normal reaction is to consider dramatic action. We become angry, resentful, and aggressive at times. Our mind fills with a variety of plans that often range from rescue and kidnapping to ambushing the controller/abuser with a ball bat. A rule of thumb is that any aggression toward the controller/abuser will result in additional difficulties for your loved one. Try to remain calm and await an opportunity to show your love and support when your loved one needs it.

- In some cases, as in teenagers and young adults, the family may still provide some financial, insurance, or other support. When we receive angry responses to our phone calls, our anger and resentment tells us to cut off their support. I've heard "If she's going to date that jerk, it's not going to be in a car I'm paying for!" and "If he's choosing that woman over his family, he can drop out of college and flip hamburgers!" Withdrawing financial support only makes your loved one more dependent upon the controller/abuser. Remember, if we're aggressive by threatening, withdrawing support, or pressuring - we become the threatening force, not the controller/abuser. It actually moves the victim into the support of the controller. Sadly, the more of an "ordeal" they experience, the more bonding takes place as noted in Stockholm Syndrome and cognitive dissonance.

- As you might imagine, the combination of Stockholm Syndrome and cognitive dissonance may also be active when our loved one is involved in cults, unusual religions, and other groups. In some situations, the abuser and controller is actually a group or organization. Victims are punished if they are viewed as disloyal to the group. While this article deals with individual relationships, the family guidelines may be helpful in controlling-group situations.

Final Thoughts

You may be the victim of a controlling and abusive partner, seeking an understanding of your feelings and attitudes. You may have a son, daughter, or friend currently involved with a controlling and abusive partner, looking for ways to understand and help.

If a loved one is involved with a Loser, a controlling and abusing partner, the long-term outcome is difficult to determine due to the many factors involved. If their relationship is in the “dating” phase, they may end the relationship on their own. If the relationship has continued for over a year, they may require support and an exit plan before ending the relationship. Marriage and children further complicates their ability to leave the situation. When the victim decides to end the unhappy relationship, it’s important that they view loved ones as supportive, loving, and understanding – not a source of pressure, guilt, or aggression.

This article is an attempt to understand the complex feelings and attitudes that are as puzzling to the victim as they are to family and friends. I’ve outlined recommendations for detaching from a Loser or controlling/abusive individual (www.drjoecarver.com) but clearly, there are more victims in this situation. It is hoped this article is helpful to family and friends who worry, cry, and have difficulty understanding the situation of their loved one. It has been said that knowledge is power. Hopefully this knowledge will prove helpful and powerful to victims and their loved ones.

Please consider this article as a general guideline. Some recommendations may be appropriate and helpful while some may not apply to a specific situation. In many cases, we may need additional professional help of a mental health or legal nature.

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