



# Employee NEWSLETTER

Employee Assistance Program  
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## What Does It Take to Get Out of an Abusive Relationship?

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**Leaving an abusive relationship—regardless of whether the abuse is verbal, emotional, or physical—can be a tall order. Numerous factors contribute to the difficulties of leaving an abusive relationship.**

What follows are just a few examples of obstacles that can stand in the way.

### Cyclical Abuse

Relationship abuse is often cyclical. At times, there is very little or no abuse and then suddenly it escalates. When the abuse is at max intensity, the abuse victim may make a commitment to themselves to leave the relationship the very next day.

But there is a good reason why they rarely stick to this commitment. After blowing off steam in acts of extremely violent abuse, the abuser tends to lie low for a while and may even exhibit acts of compassion toward their abused partner.

Even if an abuse survivor has been the victim of this kind of cyclical abuse dozens or hundreds of times before, survivors can't help but hope—especially when the abuser lies low and behaves with kindness toward them—that this time it will get better. They might also focus asymmetrically on the good times in the relationship.

### Feelings of Responsibility

Many abuse victims feel responsible for the abuse, blindly believing their abuser's repeated claim that they

themselves caused or provoked it. Abuse victims tend to have a pattern of abusive relationships behind them, which may appear to the victim to affirm that they really are the cause of the relationship problems and that they provoke and therefore deserve the abuse. Why else would the vast majority of their relationships end up being abusive?

### A Pattern of Abusive Relationships

The real reason abuse victims tend to experience relationship abuse in virtually all their relationships is not that they are provoking the abuse or are somehow responsible for it. Rather, the real reason is that they possess a cluster of character-related features that abusers instinctively know they can exploit for their own selfish ends. For example, abuse victims may be naturally trusting, faithful, giving, kind, subservient, selfless, quick to forgive, nonassertive, conflict-averse, and optimistic.

Abusers "get off" on abusing others and are instinctively drawn to potential partners with easily exploitable character-related features. Not only are they masters at identifying and tracking down their "prey" but they also tend to be superficially charming and excessively self-confident, which facilitates the final step, which is that of trapping their "prey," and making them dependent on them.

This combination of factors makes abuse-prone individuals much more likely to enter into relationships with self-serving abusers than their less easily exploitable peers.

### Financial Dependence and Fear

Abuse victims often depend financially on their intimate partner. If they leave, they risk being financially unable to take care of themselves, losing custody of their children (if any), and putting the well-being of themselves

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and their loved ones in jeopardy, as abusers who are deserted by their partners may avenge their disobedience. These additional obstacles can make it even harder for an abuse victim to leave an abusive relationship.

### Abuse Victims Who Manage to Leave

Despite the odds against them, many victims eventually succeed in leaving their abusive partners, and some even manage to break the pattern of jumping from one abusive relationship to another.

It's easy to imagine the relief these victims must feel once they are free of their abuser. Unfortunately, any feelings of relief they may have been overshadowed by a host of negative and destructive emotions. Most abuse survivors suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder many years after escaping an abusive relationship.

### New Research on Pre- and Post-Abuse Perceptions

To further investigate the emotions of victims that plan and succeed in escaping abusive relationships, psychologists Amandine Dziewa and Fabienne Glowacz (2022) interviewed 21 abuse victims of mixed genders to identify patterns of perceptions shared by victims of relationship abuse.

The researchers found that abuse victims are much more likely to escape an abusive relationship if they first undergo a radical change in perception of who they are, who their intimate partner is, and what the relationship is really like. Before abuse victims can actually escape an abusive relationship, they must thus change their perceptions of their own identity, their intimate partner, and their intimate relationship.

Certain external events can speed up the departing process. For example, a sudden escalation of violence in an abusive relationship, which presents an excessive shock and trauma to the abuse victim, can help make them act on their commitment to leave.

### Self-Restructuring

To really get out of relationship abuse for good, abuse victims need to enforce an identity shift in themselves—also called a “self-restructuring.” Before they can restructure or re-constitute their “self,” they

first need to see themselves and identify as victims of relationship abuse.

Professional help and support from family and friends can help abuse victims to get to a point where they conceive of themselves as true abuse victims. To identify as true abuse victims, they need to acknowledge to themselves that they are not responsible for the abuse and that they could not have prevented it.

For abuse victims to truly end the circle of abuse, they need to restructure their identity, along with their perception of abusive partners and abusive relationships.

Subjective changes in the victim's perception of their own “self,” the true character of their intimate partner, and the abusive nature of their relationship may be necessary for them to gain sufficient awareness of the true cause of the relationship problems and for them to make a binding decision to get away from their abuser and from toxic relationships for good.

If you suspect you or someone you know is experiencing domestic violence, **please reach out to the EAP by calling 800-777-4114.** We are here for you 24/7.

### References:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-mysteries-love/202209/what-does-it-take-get-out-abusive-relationship>