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Domestic Violence: Traits of an Abuser

Common Personality Traits of a Domestic Abuser

Below are a list of behaviors, traits and beliefs which are common in abusive personalities. These are commonly known as **Warning Signs of abusive personalities**

While not all abusive people show the same traits, or display the tendencies to the same extent, if several behavioral traits are present, there is a strong tendency toward abusiveness. Generally, the more warning signs are present, the greater the likelihood of violence. In some cases, an abuser may have only a couple of behavioral traits that can be recognized, but they are very exaggerated (e.g. extreme jealousy over ridiculous things).

Often the domestic abuser will initially try to explain his/her behavior as signs of his/her love and concern, and the victim may be flattered at first; as time goes on, the behaviors become more severe and serve to dominate, control and manipulate the victim.

Jealousy

At the beginning of a relationship, an abuser will always say the jealousy is a sign of love. He/she may question you about whom you have spoken to or seen during the day, may accuse you of flirting, or be jealous of time you spend with family, friends, children or hobbies which do not include him/her. As the jealousy progresses, he/she may call you frequently during the day or drop by unexpectedly. He may be unhappy about or refuse to let you work for fear you'll meet someone else, check the car mileage or ask friends to keep an eye on you. Jealousy is not proof of love; it is a sign of insecurity and possessiveness.

Controlling Behavior

Controlling behavior is often disguised or excused as concern. Concern for your safety, your emotional or mental health, the need to use your time well, or to make sensible decisions. Your abuser may be angry or upset if you are 'late' coming back from work, shopping, visiting friends, etc., even if you told him/her you would be later back than usual. Your abuser may question you closely about where you were, whom you spoke to, the content of every conversation you held, or why you did something he/she was not involved in. As this behavior gets worse, you may not be allowed to make personal decisions about the house, clothing, going to church or how you spend your time or money or even make you ask for permission to leave the house or room. Alternately, he/she may theoretically allow you your own decisions, but penalize you for making the wrong ones. Concern for our loved ones to a certain extent is normal - trying to control their every move is not.

Quick Involvement

Many victims of abuse dated or knew their abuser for less than six months before they were engaged or living together. The abuser will often claim 'love at first sight', that you are 'made for each other', or that you are the only person whom he could ever talk to so openly, feel so at home with, could understand him so well. He/she may tell you that they have never loved anyone so much or felt so loved by anyone so much before, when you have really only known each other for a short amount of time. He/she needs someone desperately, and will pressure you to commit to him/her or make love before you feel the relationship has reached 'that stage'. He/she may also make you feel guilty for not committing yourself to him/her.

Unrealistic Expectations

The abuser may expect you to be the perfect husband, wife, mother, father, lover, and friend. He/she is very dependent on you for all his/her needs, and may tell you he/she can fulfill all your needs as lover, friend, and companion. Statements such as: 'If you love me, I'm all you need', 'You are all I need.' are common. Your abuser may expect you to provide everything for him/her emotionally, practically, financially or spiritually, and then blame you for not being perfect or living up to expectation.

Isolation

The abuser may try to curtail your social interaction. He/she may prevent you from spending time with your friends or family and demand that you only go places 'together'. He/she may accuse you of being 'tied to your mother's apron strings', not be committed to the relationship, or view people who are your personal friends as 'causing trouble' or 'trying to put a wedge' between you. He/she may want to live in the country without a phone, not let you use the car, stop you from working or gaining further education or qualifications.

Blame-shifting for Problems

Very rarely will an abusive personality accept responsibility for any negative situation or problem. If they are unemployed, can't hold down a job, were thrown out of college or University or fall out with their family, it is always someone else's fault, be it the boss, the government, or their mother. They may feel that someone is always doing them wrong, or out to get them. He/she may make mistakes and then blame you for upsetting him/her or preventing him/her from doing as they wished to.

Blame-shifting for Feelings

The abuser will deny feelings stem from within him/her but see them as reactions to your behavior or attitude toward him/her. He/she may tell you that 'you make me mad', 'you're hurting me by not doing what I ask', or that he/she cannot help feeling mad, upset, etc. Feelings may be used to manipulate you, i.e. 'I would not be angry if you didn't ...' Positive emotions will often also be seen as originating outside the abuser, but are more difficult to detect. Statements such as 'You make me happy' or 'You make me feel good about myself' are also signs that the abuser feels you are responsible for his sense of well-being. Either way, you become in his/her mind the cause of good and bad feelings and are therefore responsible for his/her emotional well-being and happiness. Consequently, you are also to blame for any negative feelings such as anger, upset or depression.

Hypersensitivity

Most abusers have very low self-esteem and are therefore easily insulted or upset. They may claim their feelings are 'hurt' when they are really angry, or take unrelated comments as personal attacks. They may perceive normal set-backs (having to work additional hours, being asked to help out, receiving a parking fine, etc.) as grave personal injustices. They may view your preference for something which differs from their own as a criticism of their taste and therefore themselves (e.g. blue wallpaper rather than pink, etc.).

Cruelty to Animals

The abuser may punish animals brutally, be insensitive to their pain or suffering, or neglect to care for the animals to the point of cruelty, e.g. not feeding them all day, leaving them in areas

he/she knows will cause them suffering or distress. There is a strong correlation between cruelty to animals and domestic violence which is still being researched.

Cruelty to Children

The abusers unrealistic expectations of their partner are often mirrored in their attitude toward children. He/she will think of children as 'small adults' and blame the children for not being responsible, having common sense or understanding. He/she may expect children to be capable far beyond their ability (e.g. is angry with a two-year old for wetting their pants or being sick on the carpet, waking at night or being upset by nightmares) and will often met out punishments for 'naughtiness' the child could not be aware of. Abusers may tease children until they cry, or punish children way beyond what could be deemed appropriate. He/she may not want children to eat at the table, expect them to stay quiet, or keep to their room all evening while he/she is at home. Since abusers want all your attention themselves, they resent your spending time with the children or any normal demands and needs the children may have. There is a very strong link between Domestic Violence and Child Abuse.

'Playful' use of Force in Sex

He/she may pressurize you to agree to forceful or violent acts during sex, or want to act out fantasies where you are helpless. A male abuser may let you know that the idea of "rape" excites him. He/she may show little concern about whether you want to have intercourse and uses sulking or anger to manipulate you into compliance. Starting sex while you are sleeping, demanding sex when you are ill or tired, or refusing any form of intimacy unless you are willing to go 'all the way' can all be signs that he/she could be sexually abusive or sexually violent.

Rigid Gender Roles

Abusers usually believe in stereotypical gender roles. A man may expect a woman to serve him; stay at home, obey him in all things - even things that are criminal in nature. A male abuser will often see women as inferior to men, more stupid, unable to be a whole person without a relationship. Female abusers may expect the man to provide for them entirely, shift the responsibility for her well-being onto him or heckle him as being 'not a real man' if he shows any weakness or emotion.

Verbal Abuse

This is a fairly important warning sign and really quite easy to spot once you can tell all the little ways in which you are being verbally abused. In addition to saying things that are meant to be cruel and hurtful, either in public or in private, this can include degrading remarks or running down any accomplishments. Often the abuser will tell you that you are 'stupid', could not manage without him/her. He/she may keep you up all night to 'sort this out once and for all' or even wake you at night to continue to verbally abuse you. The abuser may even say kindly things to your face, but speak badly about you to friends and family.

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

Very rarely do abusers conform to the stereotypical image of a constantly harsh, nasty or violent person, either in public or in private. More frequently the abuser portrays a perfectly normal and pleasant picture to the outside world (often they have responsible jobs or are respected and important members of the local community or Church) and reserves the abuse for you in the privacy of your own home. Nor are abusers always overtly abusive or cruel, but can display apparent kindness and consideration. This Jekyll and Hyde tendency of the abuser serves to further confuse the victim, while protecting themselves from any form of suspicion from outsiders. Many victims describe "sudden" changes in mood - one minute nice and the next explosive or hysterical, or one minute happy and the next minute sad. This does not indicate some special "mental problem" but are typical of abusive personalities, and related to other characteristics such as hypersensitivity.

Drink or Substance Abuse

While neither drinking or the use of drugs are signs of an abusive personality, heavy drinking or drug abuse may be a warning sign and do increase the risks of abuse, especially violence, taking

place. Often an abusive person will blame the drink for his/her abuse. However, a person who, knowing there is a risk he/she could be violent when drinking or on drugs, chooses to get drunk or high, is in effect choosing to abuse. The link between substance abuse and domestic abuse is still being researched, and it is apparent that while neither alcohol nor drugs necessarily cause violence, they do increase the risk of violence.

History of Battering or Sexual Violence

Very rarely is abuse or violence a one-off event: a batterer will beat any woman he is with; a sexually abusive person will be abusive toward all his intimate partners. Situational circumstances do not make a person an abusive personality. Sometimes friends or family may try to warn you about the abuser. Sometimes the abuser may tell you himself/herself that he/she has hit or sexually assaulted someone in the past. However, they may further go on to explain that "she made me do it by ..." or in some other way not take responsibility and shift the blame on to the victim. They may tell you that it won't happen with you because "you love them enough to prevent it" or "you won't be stupid enough to wind me up that much". Once again, this is denying their own responsibility for the abuse, and shifting the responsibility for the relationship to remain abuse-free on to you. Past violence is one of the strongest pointers that abuse will occur. If at all possible, try to speak to their previous partners.

Negative Attitude toward Women

Some men may tell you that you are different to all the women they have known before, who display a lack of respect of women generally or who talk negatively and disrespectfully of their previous wives or girlfriends. They may tell you that you are special, not like the others and that they consider themselves to be the luckiest man alive to have found the last decent woman. It is not likely to be long before they remember that you are a woman and don't deserve their respect.

Threatening Violence

This would obviously include any threat of physical force such as "If you speak to him/her again, I'll kill you", or "If any wife of mine acted like John's did, I'd kill her." Threats are designed to manipulate and control you, to keep you in your place and prevent you making your own decisions. Most people do not threaten their mates, but an abuser will excuse this behavior by saying "everybody talks like that.", maintaining he/she is only saying this because the relationship or you are so important to him/her, tell you you're "over-sensitive" for being upset by such threats, or obviously want to hurt him/her. Threats can also be less overt, such as "If you leave me, I will kill myself", or "You are so wonderful, I will never let you go/couldn't live without you".

Breaking or Striking Objects

The abusive personality may break your treasured object, beat his/her fists on the table or chair or throw something at or past you. Breaking your things is often used as a punishment for some imagined misdeed on your part. Sometimes it will be justified by saying that now that you are with him/her, you don't need these items any more. Breaking your possessions also has the effect of de-personalizing you, denying you your individuality or literally trying to break links to your past. Beating items of furniture or throwing objects will often be justified by saying you wound him/her up so much they lost control, once again shifting the blame for this behavior on to you, but are actually used to terrorize you into submission. Only very immature or abusive people beat on objects in the presence of other people in order to threaten or intimidate them.

Any Force during an Argument

BIG warning sign! What starts off in early courtship as a bit of a push or a shove can turn into full-blown beatings not long down the road. An abuser may physically restrain you from leaving the room, lash out at you with his/her hand or another object, pin you against a wall or shout 'right in your face'. Basically any form of force used during an argument can be a sign that serious physical violence is a strong possibility.

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