

Red Flags: A Domestic Violence Awareness Guest Blog Post Survivor Speaks

By Madison Welch



What is an Abusive Partner?

If you want to create awkward silence in a crowded room, there's no better way than to bring up domestic violence — bonus points if it's your own survival story. Most people are afraid to talk about it. They avoid it, as if ignoring it could magically make the victims and perpetrators disappear.

Not me.

I am afraid of domestic violence no longer. And my voice will be heard.

Trapped in a relationship with an abusive partner when I was just 15, fear dictated my life for far too long. It's time my story be told. Hopefully, this blog will shed some light on what it's like to be a survivor of domestic violence.

Together, we'll shatter the stigma.

There are many types of abuse: emotional, physical, financial, sexual, and spiritual. Uncomparable, each of these elements work to exhaust victims and empower abusers.

Now, fellow survivors, we must gather our war paint and rally our battle cries. Enough is enough.

(According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline website, nearly 1 in 4 women and 1 in 7 men are victims of extreme relationship violence.)

It's important to note that this blog features a hypothetical relationship with a male abuser. I chose a male abuser because of familiarity. This is strictly hypothetical and it must be said that abusive partners can be of any gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, etc. There is no "typical abuser." The only thing that links abusers is their conscious choice to abuse.

This blog mostly focuses on my story. While my experience may be similar to that of other survivors, it does not reflect what happens in all relationships with abusive partners. Just because something worked for me does not mean that it worked for other survivors or will work for others who are seeking a way out. Every survivor's experience is unique. There is no right way to get out.

It's also important to point out that, although this blog describes these behaviors successively, this isn't a linear process. Abusers oscillate between loving and violent in what is called "The Cycle of Abuse." Over time, however, the abuse tends to escalate in a linear fashion. That is what this blog is focused on.

In the following pages, we will get too-close-for-comfort with domestic violence and abusive partners. From the honeymoon phase to the healing process, we will analyze the phases of an abusive-partner-relationship and end with how you can help.

Talking about domestic violence is uncomfortable — I understand — but this uneasiness pales in the shadow of the terror victims experience on the regular.

Like the Movies

Let's get one thing clear: abusive partners never start abusive. If that were the case, nobody would consent to dating them in the first place.

Relationships with an abusive partner and relationships with healthy partners start off the same. He'll take her on a date, get her flowers, tell her how beautiful she looks that night. It's like living a Nora Roberts romance novel — almost too good to be true and yet so good she can't let him go.

This bliss is temporary. The future abuser has no intent on maintaining his pretend persona and every intent on gaining her trust. He will mold himself into whoever she wants him to be. He will project anything she'd like — other than his true self.

It's so important for people who have not been in a relationship with an abusive partner to understand that the future-abuser will exhibit no warning signs during this phase.

There is no way to know better.

The length of all of the phases depend on the abuser. Every relationship with an abusive partner is different in detail, but similar in trend.

(As written on The National Domestic Violence Hotline website, intimate partner violence affects more than 12 million people each year.)

At 15, I was thriving. I maintained a 4.0 GPA, I was a starting JV volleyball player, I worked part-time at the Subway in my hometown. I had a vision for my future: a career in the FBI catching bad guys. My family loved and supported me; I even got to call myself an auntie.

I had no idea that abusive partners existed. I was not aware of the warning signs. Domestic violence seemed like this distant, flickering neon sign that I couldn't quite read. It was something that only happened to other people.

So, when an 18-year old bad-boy from my high school started pursuing me romantically, I was elated. As any 15 year old girl would be. He made me feel seen. He made me feel important. He made me feel like he understood me better than anyone else could. He made me fall in love with him — but not the real him.

Yellow Flags

Abuse is a cancer. It begins with one mutated cell, hardly detectable but there nonetheless. And then, before a proper diagnosis, she'll be so sick that health feels like nothing more than a fever dream.

When it's her idea to spend more time with him, he'll respond overenthusiastically. When she chooses to make other plans, he'll respond negatively. Though subtle, he's conditioning her into believing spending all her time with him is her idea. This is the start of the isolation process.

To him, it's like training a dog. He needs her to behave in a certain way and, most importantly, he needs her to want it. He's brainwashing her into becoming a victim.

He'll often ask where she is, what she's doing, and who she's with. She'll think that he's curious about her oh-so-interesting life. He doesn't actually care; he's simply collecting data.

To her, he'll be the perfect man. She's coming to see that he has quirks — but everyone does. She thinks he's being genuine with her. Maybe she even sees a future with him. She trusts him because he hasn't given her a reason not to.

In this relationship, what she is crafting and what he is cursing do not equate. It's not the same on both sides.

(One in 10 high school students has experienced physical violence from a dating partner in the last year, according to the National Domestic Violence Hotline website.)

I spent my sweet-16 wrapped in the arms of the boy who would steal the rest of my teenage years. Honestly, I don't remember anything about my 16th birthday. I do remember I was with him. I always was. And I liked it that way.

A few months into dating, my abuser opened up to me about his traumatic childhood and struggle with self-diagnosed depression. He told me he'd visited all kinds of shrinks, but none could figure out what was actually wrong. He wanted to seem weak, a victim — like he couldn't be a threat even if he tried.

I was going to fix him. I was going to love him healthy.

Yellow flags are hard to recognize; that's why they're yellow. Partners in healthy relationships partake in the same conversations, the same progression of self disclosure. It's normal to spend more time together. It's normal to want to be around them. In normal relationships, there is no agenda — only genuine connection.

The difference is, in a relationship with an abusive partner, the future-abuser has an agenda. And future-victim will not be aware until it's too late.

Orange Flags

As the relationship progresses, the yellow-flag-seeds begin to poke through the abuser's false exterior. Now that the abuser has gained more of her trust, he's free to show a glimpse of his true colors.

She won't know what's happening. He'll have her so distracted with the kissy emojis, expensive dinners, and lovemaking that she'd never even think to question his motives. The fact that she likes him so much makes it easier for him to advance his agenda.

It'll catch her off guard when he makes the first demeaning comment. It'll hurt. It'll hurt more when he yells at her the first time. She'll be so confused by his reactions; she'll write them off as freak occurrences.

When the power dynamic starts to tip in his direction, she'll hardly notice. He'll start saying things like "If you love me, you'll..." in an effort to test her boundaries. She'll do whatever he asks, naturally, because she does love him. He'll relish in her obedience.

Her friends and family might notice how serious the relationship is getting. They'll probably voice their concern and it'll make her upset. She likes spending time with him. He'll tell her that the others just don't understand what it's like to have a love like theirs.

He's right — nobody but him knows what's really going on.

(As stated on the National Domestic Violence Hotline website, nearly half of all women and men in the United States have experienced psychological aggression by an intimate partner in their lifetime — 48.4% and 48.8% respectively.)

I don't remember the first time he told me he loved me. I do, however, remember the bitter taste of those three words as they rolled off my tongue so often and so robotically. After a while, they were nothing more but a leash around my neck. There was no love in that phrase — only my sense of obligation and his thirst for control.

At 17, I graduated high school a semester early. That chilly mid-January day was the last time I slept in my own bed. I moved into a run-down, two-bedroom duplex with my abuser and his entire family. I thought living with him was the next natural step in our relationship. I thought it was what I was supposed to do. I loved him and, after all, he needed me.

I no longer had any friends. Even though I lived a couple miles from my parent's house, I rarely visited. Seeing my niece was nothing short of a miracle. If I did go anywhere, it was with him and never for too long.

He would always tell me about how he had my best interest at heart. How he knew what was best for me. How what was best was him.

My abuser, as with many other abusers, grew up with an abusive parent. However, this is no excuse. He was fully aware of the emotional, physical, and psychological pain he inflicted. He consciously chose to continue the cycle of abuse at my expense.

Red Flags

People who haven't lived through real red flags think they're easy to see. Like all at once, there's this blood red, three by five foot piece of scratchy fabric flapping in your face. That couldn't be farther from the truth.

The abuser has already introduced her to his abusive tendencies. He's been spoon feeding her sugar-coated arsenic, poisoning her sense of normal. Now that she's built up a tolerance, he'll up the dose.

He's conditioned her into ignoring his flaws, trapped her into codependency, and tricked her into thinking it was all her idea.

Whenever they fight, it's nasty. He might hit her, hold her down, or choke her. He could threaten to crash the car or shoot her. He'll tell her she's worthless and that nobody else will want her. He'll do whatever he can to gain control.

If she's a fighter — and I don't know a woman who isn't — she's going to get it worse. He won't like her defiance and she's going to be stuck with the consequences. The abuser will make her apologize for not submitting. He won't be held accountable. She can't hold him accountable right now.

When things are good, though, they're absolute bliss. He'll treat her like a queen. He knows he made a mistake by hurting her and he'll be extra sweet to make up for it. He'll tell her that he didn't mean for it to go that far (he did) or that he didn't know what he was doing (he was fully aware) and that it won't happen again (it will).

She's going to believe him. She yearns for him to be the man she first met, the one she fell in love with. She'll start to believe that his behavior really is her fault. She'll want to be better for him because she doesn't want it to happen again.

(On average, 24 people per minute are victims of rape, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner in the United States, as cited by The National Domestic Hotline website.)

My abuser would threaten to commit suicide as a way to establish dominance. I have sat through pretend panic attacks and untied more nooses than I care to count. When those didn't work, he

would grab the sharpest object in the room, lock us both in the bathroom, and cut himself until I complied.

He put his hands on me three times.

He would get upset because he could've killed me — there wasn't time for me to process the idea that I could've died.

After we fought, he would rape me. He wanted to feel good after all of that bad. It was the ultimate way of making sure I knew my place. The ultimate way of asserting power over me. The ultimate way of making me feel small.

My abuser made sure I didn't trust my own perception of reality. Instead, he conditioned me to live in his reality. It was safer there. If it was sunny outside and he said it was raining, I could feel the water on my skin. This phenomena is called gaslighting.

The worst part about this phase was that the more my friends, family, and little voice in my head said that he was bad, the less control he sensed he had and the more he acted out. The more he hurt me, the more terrified I was. The more he hurt himself, the more I believed that it was my fault. The more terrified I was, the more I couldn't leave. The more I believed it was my fault, the more obligated I felt to stay. The longer I stayed, the more my friends and family spoke up... and so on.

It's not that victims of domestic violence don't see the red flags. They just think the blood stains are their fault.

Living with Your Abuser

Giving someone the label of "abuser" can be scarier than the abuse. It's holding them accountable for all of the animosity that comes with the title. It's recognizing yourself as the victim. It's drawing the line.

People who haven't lived through this kind of trauma will always pose the question, "Why didn't she just leave?" It's not that easy — if it was, she would.

It's not like a typical break-up. She's been taught that she's powerless; she thinks she has no rights. He's threatened her, hurt her, and degraded her. She's been conditioned to believe that her feelings and experiences have no value. She might be in denial that any abuse occurred at all.

She could be financially dependent. If she leaves, she might not have a place to live, she might lose her job or custody of her children. It might go against her religious values. Her friends and family might be upset and not believe her.

She loves him. She's attached to him, perhaps even trauma-bonded to him. She knows that he does nice things for her. She knows that he hurts her in more ways than one. But she also knows that the abuse will worsen.

She must weigh the consequences of either choice. If she chooses to stay, those on the outside cannot hold it against her. If she chooses to leave, then she must do so in the safest way possible. It must be a surprise and until she does so, he cannot know she has any intention of leaving.

(As stated on the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence website, 72% of all murder-suicides involve an intimate partner, 94% of the victims of these murder-suicides are female.)

I tried to leave my abuser numerous times. It never ended well for me. He would get extremely violent, punching holes in the walls, breaking down doors, knocking furniture on top of me. He was out of control and out of touch with reality. The only way to survive was to comply.

I knew that I couldn't stay about a year and a half into the relationship (I was with him for three years). I knew that I needed to get out, but I didn't know how. I had no one to reach out to. I didn't know what to do. I fantasized about running away in the dead of night. The price of any botched attempt could have easily been — and almost was — my life. When it comes down to it, I couldn't leave because he physically wouldn't let me.

He had me convinced that he knew everything, including my thoughts. I wasn't even safe in my own head. I couldn't label him an abuser, not unless I wanted to get abused. Even so, how could I, when it was so normal for me?

Now painfully ironic, one of my abuser's favorite quotes by Alan Watts reads: "If you want to outwit the devil, it's extremely important that you don't give him any advanced notice. Even if you only announce to yourself your intentions, the devil will know, because who do you think the devil is?"

It's such a polarizing and contradictory experience to be in love with your abuser. As much as I loved him, I hated him. As much as I felt safe, I lived in terror. As much as I was in denial, I knew. But he couldn't know that I knew.

Getting Out

Choosing to leave an abusive partner is arguably the most life-changing and empowering decisions a woman can make. Finally, she chooses herself.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline can be reached at 1-800-799-7233 or via an instant chat at thehotline.org. The website outlines a safety plan before leaving, while leaving, and after leaving. It includes variations for pregnant women, women with children, and women with pets. It also talks about emotions all victims will experience.

When leaving an abusive partner, safety is of the highest concern. The abuser will do everything in his power to keep her from leaving, from emotional and psychological manipulation to physical harm. It is absolutely vital that she stands her ground. The abuse will only be worse if she backs down.

No matter what she feels in the moment, her life will be better without him in it. It's going to feel so backwards at first, but she's making the right choice.

There are multiple support systems, such as The Hotline, in place to help ease the transition. There are so many resources available. All she needs to do is ask for help, which is sometimes the hardest step.

(On a typical day, there are more than 20,000 phone calls placed to domestic violence hotlines nationwide, as stated on the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence Website.)

August 5th, 2017, I woke up loving my abuser as I had for the past three years. I did not know that that would be the day I left him. Most importantly, neither did he.

My coworker, Bekah, lived down the street. I had spent most of the day with her; my abuser was less than pleased. She noticed his unrelenting phone calls and voiced her concern. While dinner was on the stove, as if on autopilot, I heard my voice say that he had hurt me. We cried together. She held my hands and told me that we were going to end it.

We called my parents — who had heard this story before and weren't convinced. They came to pick me up. As we walked to the car, my abuser sat on the asphalt of the parking lot. I can still hear that sickly sweet voice he used to try to lure me back to him, calling me sweetheart and promising he had no violent intent. I didn't look at him as we walked to the car.

I spent the first night away from him 30 miles away at my sister's house. I immediately changed all my passwords, deleted all of my pictures of him, and blocked him on all social media platforms. After I changed my phone number, my sister listened to his hysterical voicemails and read the deranged text messages. I didn't witness them for myself for weeks.

My cousin Sheila worked for Victims Advocates and walked me through the process of filing a restraining order, pressing charges, and speaking to a therapist. As I recounted to the female police officer and her notepad the details of the physical abuse, I felt like a freakshow. This was the first that any of my friends and family had heard of him abusing me. They had no idea it was so bad — and neither did I.

My whole world was crumbling at my fingertips — and this time it really was my fault. As scary as it was though, it wasn't anywhere near as scary as staying with him.

Life as a Survivor

I am learning to value the space between victim and survivor. Some days, I am more victim, others I am all survivor. Most of the time, I am both: wounded, healing, and healed.

The National Hotline for Domestic Violence website has a list of helpful tips for life after leaving. They recommend cutting off contact with your ex, surrounding yourself with support, and considering counseling.

Survivors can feel even more isolated after leaving their abuser than they felt with him. It's important she creates a circle of support — and she needs to be a part of that circle.

In my experience, getting a restraining order helped me feel safer. The same cannot be said for all other survivors. But it's vital that every survivor create an environment in which she feels safe.

Even if they had my best interest at heart, the people closest to me blamed me. My sadness made everyone uncomfortable. I wore my grief like it was going out of style.

They didn't understand that this wasn't just a break-up. They didn't understand the physical, emotional, and psychological scars. They didn't understand even after I explained all the gory details. In hindsight, it's a blessing no one really gets it — I wouldn't wish that on anyone.

(As stated on a National Coalition Against Domestic Violence fact sheet, 7 out of 10 psychologically abused women display symptoms of PTSD and/or depression.)

There is no right way to heal. There is no timeline, no set of rules. Every day I am away from him, I am more myself. I am deep cleaning him out of every fiber of my being with sunshine, salt water, and self-love.

I know that I will never be the same; I have been through a life-changing trauma. I know that the atrocities I witnessed and the harm he caused me were not my fault. I know that I am safe now. I know that it's okay not to be okay. These are the comforts I wrap myself in like a warm security blanket.

I am cultivating my own closure. Some days I struggle with him not being held responsible by the legal system, other days I don't think about him at all. I know that this experience does not define who I am.

I do not forgive him. I don't need to.

Rather, I forgive myself. Everyday I consciously chose self-love. I allow my bad days to come; they're less frequent now. Poetry and painting serve as constructive outlets for the myriad of conflicting feelings within my heart. I am making beauty out of the darkness — cliché, I know, but true.

I moved out of my hometown in January 2018, about five months after leaving my abuser. After completing my third semester of college — with a pretty good GPA, might I add — I have decided to study Early Childhood Education. I have had three jobs — and quit three jobs. I spent this past summer in Hawaii. My life only includes those with my best interest at heart.

I am discovering who I really am — and coming to find that she is a woman I love.

How to Help

Domestic violence is not going away any time soon. The first step in eradicating it is talking about it. Survivors no longer need to live in fear if they are surrounded by a community not afraid to mention the make-up covered bruises. Abusers will be held accountable in a community

that does not take “Well, he’s a nice guy…” for an answer. It is our job to cultivate this kind of community.

Honestly, talking about it isn’t enough. Organizations like The Hotline, the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, Break the Silence About Domestic Violence, TESSA, among many others are always looking for volunteers. There can never be too much support for this cause.

TESSA is an organization local to the Pike’s Peak region. Applications for working with TESSA are at tessa.org/volunteer. As a volunteer for this organization, one would provide administrative support, work with children affected by domestic violence, help women living in the safehouse, answer calls on the crisis line, among other tasks. TESSA requires volunteers to complete a 36-hour domestic violence and sexual assault advocacy training.

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, based out of Denver, is attacking the source of domestic violence. According to their website, their goal is to “change the conditions that lead to domestic violence such as patriarchy, privilege, racism, sexism, and classism.” They allow for donations and even have a membership program. NCADV has a number of programs from providing reconstructive surgery for victims to Remember My Name, which recognizes women and men who have been killed by their significant others.

I’m not ready to volunteer for these organizations yet — and that’s okay. I am still healing. Change happens through individuals and right now, I am the individual who needs my help the most. When I am ready, I plan on reaching out to the NCADV in particular to see how I can do my part.

By writing this, I am giving back. No longer can my abuser hide in my silence. I am sending this shame to the wind — it was never mine anyway.

I honor my trauma, my experience, and my healing. I am becoming more comfortable in my own skin with every sunrise and more grateful for the life I have made with every sunset. I now know that I am capable. Autonomous. Intelligent. Tenacious. Radiant. Authentic. Kind.

I am a survivor of domestic violence.

Madison Welch Bio

Colorado born and raised, I am a 21 year old college student with hopes of changing the world. Writing is — and always has been — my passion. You can almost always find me with a notebook and pencil nearby. Otherwise, I’m working, reading, spending time in nature, or with friends and family.