

Breaking Free from an Abusive Relationship*

Following are the stages that victims of abuse journey through on the path to freedom:

Stage 1: Realization – Breaking out of Denial

Stage 2: Finding your voice: Breaking the silence

Stage 3: Stopping the repetitive cycle of abuse

Stage 4: Reclaiming your power

Stage 5: Healing

Stage 1: Realization – Breaking out of Denial

Here are the steps that occur as a victim of abuse begins to break out of denial and starts to see the truth:

1. Realize that you are a victim of abuse
2. Begin identifying how you have been victimized by abuse
3. Begin to understand your abuser's true nature
4. Begin to see how you have helped co-create the abusive relationship

At some point you will begin to see the truth and as you do so, you find that as you let the truth in, you begin to be set free. You will find that you have a distinct shift in your thinking where you will gain insight and have an honest assessment of the state of your abusive relationship, maybe for the first time. This happens when your defense mechanisms that kept your relationship in tact start to unravel. This is when your path to liberation begins.

In order to recover from an abusive relationship you need to start evaluating the relationship from the vantage point of your partner – how it serves his needs; how being in power helps him; how he does not respect or show love to you; how he does not consider you his equal, and how he operates by a set of double standards. You should also evaluate the emotional “hooks” he uses to keep you dependent on him.

It is helpful to evaluate yourself and all your silences, sacrifices, and compromises. Only focusing on his needs causes you to lose your sense of self, identity, and independence. You should also evaluate the level of healthiness and the level of abusiveness in the relationship.

Questions to ask yourself:

- How has the abuse affected the quality of my life?
- What are the different ways he tries to control me?
- How often do abusive incidents occur?
- Does the abuse tend to escalate in terms of frequency and severity, despite what I do?
- Am I compromising the safety of my children?
- How does he make me feel threatened or unsafe?
- What buttons of mine does he push?

- What do my feelings tell me to do?
- What is the value in staying in the relationship?
- What is the “hook” that keeps me in the relationship?

Stage 2: Break the Silence

As a victim you have most likely carried a great burden by keeping the secret of the abusive relationship from others, as well as from yourself. There is a great relief when you finally break your silence and allow yourself to slowly admit the severity of your victimization.

By speaking your truth, you learn to listen to your own voice; the one you have willingly surrendered to remain in the abusive relationship. As you begin to admit the truth to yourself and to others you begin to reclaim your power. Look at what you have forfeited every time you give up your right to speak freely.

It is only by reliving your tale and putting the pieces together that you can ascertain how toxic your relationship was, and glimpse the pattern of abuse and horror you have lived through.

You have been used to blaming yourself and minimizing your abuser’s behaviors. As you learn to find your voice and receive support from others you learn to eliminate the rationalizations you once relied on to sustain your abusive relationship.

The bottom line is, once you start talking about the abuse you begin to breathe life back into your own perceptions, desires, standards, sense of self, and personal value.

Reaching out and asking for help can save your life.

Stage 3: Stop the Repetitive Cycle of Abuse

In order to deal with the perpetrator and stop the cycle of violence, the victim must **disengage** completely from the power dynamic he has created and thrives on. “Contact is fuel for the fire.” This involves **stepping out of the reactionary mode** he has conditioned you to be in. **He desires a rise out of you** to feel powerful and in control. Anything you say or do, and any resistance or confrontation he encounters will only trigger an escalation of his domination tactics. You must come to terms with reality and all that this entails, including:

- You must surrender the false hope that you can effectively prevent or manage abusive incidents.
- You cannot appease or defuse his explosiveness.
- He will continue to behave in predictably unpredictable and hurtful ways regardless of your actions or protests.
- **You have no control** over any aspect of his abusiveness.

The Abuser’s Abusiveness is not your fault!

Staying in the relationship co-creates the reality of abuse and gives your spouse permission in some ways to continue his unacceptable behavior.

Ask yourself this question: “What does it take to walk away?”

Breaking out of an abusive relationship is very much like detoxing from an addiction to a substance. Staying in close contact with your perpetrator impedes your healing progress.

Guidelines to disengage from your abuser:

“Observe, don’t absorb.”

- Notice how he actively tries to push your buttons.
- Identify how he tries to exploit your weaknesses.
- Stay detached from the negative feelings and reactions he attempts to trigger in you.
- Distance yourself from his projections, blame, and accusations; do not personalize them.
- Resist being in a reactionary mode and do not try to retaliate or challenge him in any way.
- Identify his irrational behavior and do not attempt to rationalize with him.
- Do not negotiate, no matter how much he wants to. This is not a discussion of how to improve things, correct things, change the past, find blame, or start over.
- Seek and apply strategies that make you unavailable to your abuser.

Stage 4: Reclaim Your Power

- **Set Limits**
Relinquish all of the coping strategies you employed to keep the peace in the relationship, seek resolution, or not agitate your abuser. Limit your time around the abuser, because the less exposure to abuse will increase your strength.
- **Establish Boundaries**
While you cannot change another person, you can establish what you will or will not tolerate. Establish boundaries that will ensure the utmost in emotional and physical well-being for yourself. One boundary to emphasize is that you will no longer allow your abuser to assert authority over you in any way.
- **Demand Change**
Demanding change will help you determine if your partner is willing to do something about his unacceptable behaviors. In general, asking for your abuser to change will most likely not motivate him to do so. Even if your abuser does not change, by asking for him to do so you are finding your voice, empowering yourself, and learning to advocate for your own well-being.
- **Assert Your Rights** (Yes, you do have rights in this relationship, no matter what your abuser believes)
- **Own your personal power**
When you get caught up in an abusive relationship, you lose yourself and hand your power over to your abuser. This part of the process involves reclaiming yourself and the power you slowly gave away. Part of claiming or reclaiming your personal power involves developing and owning your identity as an individual; a person of value, with independent thoughts, feelings, values, and desires.

- **Develop a vision for yourself**

Start envisioning an abuse free life. Victims often limit themselves to accepting only one path in life. Learn to imagine and create a life that is not surrounded by abuse or fear.

- **Liberate yourself from the prison of your mind**

Realize you have choices and you can choose to live a healthy life. You can choose to live in freedom. Allow yourself to embrace freedom at every level of your life.

- **Be the role model your children can admire and respect** (If you have children, of course)

Stage 5: Heal

Understand that being in an abusive relationship causes trauma. Most likely, you suffer from post-traumatic stress. You have been damaged emotionally in ways that you don't even realize. There has been a large toll taken on your life by many aspects of the abusive relationship, including the fact that you have not been listened to or that your intuition has been destroyed. After you become aware, begin setting boundaries, and start voicing your thoughts and feelings, it is time to move forward in your healing process.

1. **Face your heartbreak**

Let yourself feel the total experience of how you've been betrayed and wounded by the person you love. Let yourself grieve and complete your grief. Write. Talk. Cry. Rest. Take it easy. Take care of yourself as you process through all of the emotions you must experience in order to fully recover from your traumatic relationship.

2. **Accept and process your victimization**

Realize that you have been victimized and that you have been a victim of abuse. You were not simply in a typical relationship with ups and downs; rather, you were the target in an abusive relationship. Understand this, even if you were never hit.

3. **Cope with the layers of emotion, trauma, and wounding**

This takes time and energy. Give yourself the space you need to look within at all that you have suffered from and lost because of your abusive relationship. Realize that you have post-traumatic-stress-disorder and that you must heal from a serious emotional injury. This takes time to face what you have been in denial about for so long. Look at your history and how you might have experienced similar patterns in your life at an earlier age.

4. **Practice Forgiveness**

Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. Forgiveness sets you free from the trap of bitterness. It is a process and a decision. Forgiveness is the willingness to surrender the desire for revenge, retaliation, or for your abuser to pay for his crimes.

5. **Embrace transformation and empowerment**

Allow yourself to change and grow into the strong person you can be. Allow yourself to own your own power and never give it away to anyone again. Embrace your growth and celebrate along the way.

*Source: Anisha Durve, *The Power to Break Free*