

From the Long Night of Abuse to the Dawn of Freedom

By Gail Wanman Holstein

You may be in an abusive relationship. It may be grinding you down, robbing you of your right to be happy—and you may not even be aware of it.

For many years I've been an advocate for victims of domestic violence. My clients have been mostly women, but also men, children, parents, gay men and lesbians, brothers, sisters, roommates, in-laws—anyone sharing living space. Every person in these relationships is unique. Yet they share one quality: sadness. They need to get out.

If you suspect your relationship is abusive, here is a three-part journey that might be the scenario for your escape.

Living in darkness

This phase is like living in a cave or being half asleep. You might be accustomed to the status quo and not see things clearly.

Maybe your parents' relationship was similar. One was up, one was down. They quarreled and appeared to hate, rather than love, one another. Their locked-in pattern of attack and counterattack seemed normal. But it didn't make them happy.

Maybe you feel undeserving, that you haven't "earned" a partner who is respectful of you, or that you must have brought this burden upon yourself. Maybe others disapproved of your choice of a mate. You've made your bed, and you have to lie in it.

Maybe your religion preaches forgiveness, and you believe that means you shouldn't stand up for yourself. When the meek inherit the earth, then you'll see who's boss—but not just yet, please.

Perhaps you were taught that if you complained, you'd really get something to complain about.

So you go long to get along. But that doesn't always work. If you resist, you're rewarded with insults, threats, and various forms of violence, from breaking furniture to breaking your teeth.

You stand in your cave and look down at a sunny valley where others laugh and have lives you can hardly even imagine. You can go back inside and turn your face to the wall.

Or not.

Waking up

Perhaps you read an article that gets to you, or your best friend gives you a frank lecture. Maybe a violent incident brings in the cops, puts you in the hospital, or terrifies your children.

You wake up—not with a gentle yawn and lazy stretch, but with a jolt. It’s time to get out!

Not so fast. First, decide where you want to go. Get a map. Fill the gas tank, check your oil. This part requires planning, patience, and courage.

This is the part where you get a handle on your feelings and study your options. There is much to consider and much, potentially, to lose. This is usually the most painful, and dangerous, part of the journey.

Maybe you call a hotline. Maybe you find an advocate who sits in the passenger seat and helps you navigate. I hope so. Perhaps you’re reading everything you can find, joining a support group, finding others taking similar journeys. You may get a restraining order, go to court, hire a lawyer or be assigned legal help, and deal with social services, the police, or other agencies.

If you’re in a shelter, you may be safe for the moment.

Now your perpetrator may march into battle. That person might believe that “all’s fair in love and war.” Custody of children, splitting up property, accusations, threats, entreaties: these are all weapons. However, a more positive metaphor might be useful. Think of these problems as obstacles, roadblocks to be gotten around. Keep your eyes on the road, hands on the wheel. Drive carefully.

When I say this part is painful, I mean you’ll have to deal with lots of conflicting emotions. Try to think of these emotions as obstacles, not trip-enders.

Love, for example, is a tough one. Love doesn’t start or stop when you choose. Love and the end of love don’t ask permission from the rational brain. Once you’ve decided to leave, the rational brain may have to outsmart love.

Hope is similar in that it pops up at the most inconvenient times. Hope can sidetrack you, make you turn around and go back to that cave again and again. And again.

Loyalty is a fine quality that serves you well, as long as the object of your loyalty is worthy of it. It’s hard to drop, especially if you are a person of principle and integrity.

Fear is major. This is probably the most important trip you’ve ever taken. You may have zero confidence in your ability to make your own way. Get some support! Don’t be afraid of being a pest to people who have offered to help. Helping you makes them happy.

Shame can freeze your engine. Now that you’re wide awake and driving, you’re humiliated by your relationship, by the amount of time you spent in the cave, by

being in this undignified position. I repeat: get help! Find a support group in which others share their stories. Some will be in worse off than you. You're not to be scorned or pitied; you're to be congratulated.

Hatred is hard to avoid. Don't deny it, but try not to act on it. Don't give it the power to poison you. When you reach a safe place where the thing you hate can't harm you, that will be the time to work on forgiveness. You have the rest of your life to process your feelings.

Arriving in the light

You drive all night. There's a faint glimmer on the horizon, so you keep heading toward it. Slowly it gets brighter and brighter, until you're bathed in sunshine. Landmarks and obstacles and shadowy forms that you couldn't make out before now stand out—in all their glory and ugliness—for you to understand and judge and appreciate.

You've made it! It has been a long, hard journey. Don't expect to arrive unscathed—you'll be scathed plenty. The drubbing you've taken might require years of physical, therapeutic, and spiritual work to put behind you.

But now you can see. You have your freedom. You have your self. These are your prizes.

The gifts are yours to keep, and yours to pass along.

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*Gail Wanman Holstein is an advocate for survivors of domestic violence.
She is also the author of **Waking the Ancients: A Novel of the Mogollon Rim,**
Thundercloud Books, ISBN 0-9740806-3-2.
See reviews, excerpts, and discussion questions on www.WakingTheAncients.com.*