

SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO? AND SHOULD I REUNITE?

Am I being abused? What does that look like? What will my family and friends think? Is it my fault? We hope we have helped you begin to find some of those answers. But there are other questions that may emerge even after you have found the answers to the more fundamental questions we just mentioned. These answers are all in the arena of What Do I Do Now?

Should I stay? Or should I go?

Deciding whether to separate or remain in a relationship can be full of bewilderment, confusion, and wrenching guilt. Making such a serious decision, with all the complex consequences that follow, is fraught with internal prohibitions, even if one's own instinct is telling her it is the right thing to do.

For instance:

- Many people of faith find that their Church cautions against or forbids separation. If not officially, then members of or friends in a church group may cast aspersions on the person separating.
- The Bible cautions against separation (add citation) but allows for it as long as there is a return, for the love of the Lord.
- For others, families may hold a tradition of never having a divorce in their lineage.
- And then, many people suffering from covert abuse wonder how their children will be affected and whether their own abusive experiences will be understandable enough to children of varying ages to justify breaking up the family.
- In any of these ways, separation can become a ripe field for Double Abuse™.

There are so many areas of life to consider when you consider whether to stay or go, parenting, work responsibilities, financial concerns, other interpersonal relationships, that you may hesitate or delay making the decision until your circumstances become unbearable. Once they do, you may react impulsively because you have passed your ability to manage your situation, which only causes more chaos and harm, to yourself or others.

This is why to take the time to make a deliberate, thoughtful, and balanced decision to stay or go is the wise and brave path

to follow. Having read many of these pages, you may now understand that you have been or are a victim of abuse, in one or more of its many forms. If so, your decision to stay or go is pivotal, as well as being a personal, one, particular to you, even if it is difficult to come to terms with. We would not presume to steer you in one direction or another about your decisions, because at some point you will know best what is the most healing path to take, but we can present to you some things to think about as you grapple with one of the most important decisions of your life.

Staying

You may not be sure enough or ready enough to leave. You may feel that you need to give your relationship another, or one last, chance. There may be legitimate reasons for staying: your vows and values, your sense that you have not exhausted all possible avenues of help, pregnancy, lack of a support system, illness of yourself or your partner, financial hardship if you leave, a recent move to a new location.

If you feel, for any number of reasons including those we might not have mentioned, that you need to stay in your relationship, ask yourself:

- **Who am I staying for?**
- **Is there anything I can do to make staying the best direction to follow?**
- **If I stay, do I have the evidence that things will improve? And if they don't, what then?**
- **Are there ways to get help for my partner?**
- **Can I be protected within this relationship?**
- **Can I ensure within this relationship that my children are protected?**
- **Are there legal services that can help me?**

- If there are financial reasons that compel me to stay, can I get a job? Return to school for further education? Get help from my family or friends?
- Do I have others to turn to if I change my mind?
- In that case, what would a separation look like?

Separating

Dr. David Hawkins, an expert in relationships has written, "There has to be a breakdown before there is a breakthrough". What this means is that often when we are in a relationship that has deteriorated, we cannot gain perspective, ensure our safety, access our own self-efficacy.

If this is the case, separation can offer:

- An essential way to build boundaries
- Create a safety net from emotional and/or physical battery
- Discover new ways to be taken seriously
- Give us the time and space for emotional and physical recovery in which to learn to think without distress, gain new perspectives, and restore our sense of self.

Separation is considered clinically correct and necessary because the relational problems have become so entrenched that they can't be sorted out as a couple at this point in time for two reasons: one, you don't have the clarity you need to understand what has been happening to you, and, two, your partner is afraid of your enlightenment. Separation may be the best avenue through which to stop the retraumatization you experience on a daily basis.

A separation is not a time to act out all your mix of feelings, your fantasies, your revenge, your blaming, your shame, anger, fear, or disgust. It is a time to use bounded space for recovery, to seek expert help, clarify your experiences, to think, and to make informed decisions, while continuing to honor and uphold the vows of your marriage. Accordingly, we recommend what is called Controlled Separation.

In Controlled Separation, you form an agreement in which both parties respect the bounds of marriage or their relationship while having time and a space to work through the problems you have been unable to work out together.

Reasons for a Controlled Separation may include but are not limited to:

- Infidelity
- Addiction
- Overt or covert abuse
- Betrayal
- Threats
- Taking advantage of a partner financially, socially, or in parenting

A number of churches have adopted Controlled Separation policies, recognizing that they may be the most reasoned and effective path to safety, secure reconciliation, or, if necessary, amicable divorce.

Controlled Separation involves making contractual agreements about:

- The reasons for separation
- The length of time for the separation
- The postponement of divorce action for a specified period of time, while retaining the right to seek legal advice
- Logistical concerns for communication, child visitation, living conditions, financial arrangements
- With whom will you spend your discretionary time? Who will you avoid? Who will confide in?
- How to discuss or not discuss your experience with others, family, friends, co-workers?
- What kind of outside support will you seek, individually or together? We recommend a safe, reliable, and fair Accountability Partner who can hold the alleged perpetrator to his necessary work and is also compassionate toward the victim.

These are just a few examples of the many areas that need to be agreed upon in order to use a Controlled Separation toward your goal of making a decision to repair and fully reinstate your marriage or to move toward an amicable divorce. There are several examples of Controlled Separation Agreements on the Internet. For one such template, go to FormsDepot for a free copy of an Agreement.

After a period of separation, many new questions are going to surface, most of them about "What next?" Embedded in these questions is a most fundamental one, "Should we reunite?"

Reuniting

While neither the victim nor the alleged perpetrator may like to hear this, any reunion rests mainly on the shoulders of the perpetrator. Reunion depends on wanting help and getting the right help. And that wanting means that the perpetrator finally comes to a place of recognizing and taking responsibility for his abuse. He may have refused to admit to his destructive behavior or that he needs help. His friends may egg him on, escalating the abuse. He may dismiss the seriousness of his actions, belittling her for being "weak." Perhaps no one will intervene. He will not be contradicted in his positions. Until he can come to terms with the reality of what his partner has been suffering, reunion is unrealistic.

The victim does not carry the responsibility for the actions of her partner. There is no excuse or supposed reason for abusing anyone, at any time, under any circumstances. As we have said in the pages, Abuse is NOT a mistake. It IS a choice. The victim will have her own work to do in terms of becoming free of fear, implementing strong boundaries, handling the guilt she may feel at separating, recovering from the degrading shame she has experienced, and coping with all the consequences of the primary trauma or Double Abuse™ she has suffered, as well as the consequences of her decision to stay or go.

The perpetrator has deep, consistent, and profound work to do in recognizing his long-held patriarchal belief systems, becoming

accountable for the purposes he had for the abuse, learning how to treat a partner with equality and in mutually beneficial ways, repairing damage, making amends, and learning how to be emotionally present and responsible for his own internal life, mentally and psychologically, and its expression. Without this work, any thought of reunion is fraught with potential danger.

We, as founders of The MEND Project, have gone in different directions concerning reunion. For one of us, divorce became the inevitable result of separation, because not only was the partner unwilling to do the work involved, he refused to recognize the problems that existed as he continued the abuse. After her own rigorous process of clarification, struggling with the decision to separate, coming to terms with the heartbreaking fact that her husband was unable to recognize the damage he was doing or engage in repair, she made the difficult decision to divorce. Eventually, after her own internal work, she was able to marry again now with a husband who is reciprocal and respectful, supportive, loving, and her best friend. For the other one of us, both she and her partner fundamentally wanted to save the marriage, despite its many challenges. In order to find clarity, gain perspective, create safety, and establish boundaries, she separated, continuing to do her own individual therapeutic work. Her partner, struggling to give up the destructive relationships with certain friends and affiliations who were double abusing, and with a great deal of help in skilled and effective therapy and programs, came to the place where he could finally recognize the covert abuse that he engaged in and do the long and grueling work to find a completely different way of relating. They have reunited and are enjoying their life together in ways they never thought possible, while continuing to do their reparative work individually and together.

We hope that these pages will help you sort out what is happening to you in your primary relationship and support you on your journeys to clarity, courage, hope, and health.

