

## 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?

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### 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. (We note that the Bible also calls us to free the oppressed and cautions us against abuse. When the abuser has not shown immediate and lasting signs of change or the victim has lasting, traumatic effects from the abuse, we believe it is inconsistent with the Word to require someone to remain in an abusive marriage.)
- Many people presume separation always leads to divorce, so it is never good.
- 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. (It is important to note that recent studies have shown that children living within a violent or abusive home setting, even if not being directly abused, are harmed and can experience significant effects from that harm into their adult years of life.)
- 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. If you are beginning to realize that you have been or are a victim of abuse, your decision to stay or go is pivotal, as well as being personal to you, and it can be difficult to come to terms with this decision. We would not presume to steer you in one direction or another about this, 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?
- We know through recent studies that measurable harm is experienced by children living in a home where there is domestic violence, what are my reasons for staying?
- 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?

**As noted below, if you are in a physically violent relationship, you need to consult with a local domestic violence agency to make sure you are properly evaluating your ability to leave safely or to be safe if you choose to stay.**

### 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 the abuser is unable to gain perspective about their own culpability until there is a serious loss. Here, separation serves as a tangible boundary with a measurable consequence signifying to the abuser that they might lose their entire relationship. Often for victims when they are in a relationship that has deteriorated, they cannot gain perspective, ensure their safety, or access their own self-efficacy. So, setting this important boundary provides the space and time to obtain these important objectives.

#### If this is the case, separation can offer:

- An essential way to build boundaries
- A safety net from emotional and/or physical battery
- Discovery of new ways to be taken seriously
- 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 and their loss of control. It is important to note that this may lead to increased abuse, retaliation and other destructive methods for the abuser to regain control. This is a crucial test of the victim's fortitude to stand their ground about separation.

**If you are in a physically violent relationship, the repercussions of this decision can be life threatening, therefore, before implementing a controlled separation, you should seek help and advice from a local domestic violence organization.**

This is one reason why couple's therapy in this stage of the relationship is strictly contraindicated, meaning it is prohibited. Later, when the abuser has come to accept that they are responsible for their destructive behaviors and ready to work towards change and the victim has gained the clarity enabling them to describe and name each abusive behavior, couple's therapy may be reintroduced. Separation may be the best avenue to lead to this outcome. Separation may also 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 designated 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 you 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 abuser their 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 such 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 abuser may like to hear this, any reunion rests mainly on the shoulders of the abuser. Reunion depends on wanting help and getting the right help. And that wanting means that the abuser finally comes to a place of recognizing and taking responsibility for the abuse. The abuser may have refused to admit to their destructive behavior or that they need help. Their friends may egg them on, escalating the abuse. The abuser might dismiss the seriousness of their actions, belittling the victim for being "weak." Perhaps no one will intervene. The abuser will not be contradicted in their positions. Until they can come to terms with the reality of what their partner has been suffering, reunion is unrealistic.

The victim does not carry the responsibility for the actions of their 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 their own work to do in terms of becoming free of fear, implementing strong boundaries, handling the guilt they may feel at separating, recovering from the degrading shame they have experienced, and coping with all the consequences of the primary trauma or Double Abuse® they have suffered, as well as the consequences of their decision to stay or go.

The abuser has deep, consistent, and profound work to do in recognizing their long-held toxic patriarchal or faulty belief systems, becoming accountable for the purposes they 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 their own internal life, mentally and psychologically, and its expression. Without this work, any thought of reunion is fraught with potential danger.

We know many victims have gone in different directions concerning reunion. For some, divorce becomes the inevitable result of separation, because not only will the abuser be unwilling to do the work involved, they refuse to recognize the problems that existed as they continue the abuse. After the victim's own rigorous process

of clarification, struggling with the decision to separate, coming to terms with the heartbreaking fact that the abuser is unable to recognize the damage they were doing or engage in repair, and that the severity of the traumatic symptoms are unmanageable, the victim must make the difficult decision to divorce. Some individuals, churches and organizations place a higher value on the institution of marriage than they do the well-being of the individuals inside the marriage. Studies show that repeated trauma, as is caused by abuse, produces life-threatening emotional and physiological symptoms and places victims in an even higher probability of exacerbated trauma, quite possibly making divorce the only opportunity for a healthy life.

