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The Stockholm Syndrome: Falling in love with an Abuser

Loving an Abuser

Are you being controlled and abused, yet you've started to **accept** it?

Are you now doing things that you always said: "Over my dead body"?

J M. Carver* recently described how bonds often form between 'victim' and abuser. His article also offers suggestions of how to deal with this problem.

We often wonder why many people in abusive relationships do not seem to be able to get out of it. They often **try to 'escape'** but just as often they **go back** for even more abuse. When the relationship finally ends, they offer comments such as "I know what he's done to me, but I still love him", "I don't know why, but I want him back", or: "This doesn't make sense. He's got a new girlfriend and he's abusing her too...but I'm jealous!"

Friends and relatives are even more amazed and **shocked** when they hear these comments or witness their loved one **returning to an abusive relationship**. While the situation doesn't make sense from a social standpoint, does it make sense from a psychological viewpoint? The answer is: "Yes!"

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On August 23rd, 1973 two machine-gun carrying criminals entered a bank in Stockholm, Sweden. Blasting their guns, the two bank robbers held **four hostages**, three women and one man, for the next 131 hours. The hostages were strapped with dynamite and held in a bank vault until finally rescued on August 28th.

After their rescue, the hostages exhibited a shocking attitude considering they were threatened, abused, and feared for their lives for over five days. In their media interviews, it was clear that **they supported their captors** and actually feared law enforcement personnel who came to their rescue more than the captors!

The hostages had begun to feel the captors were actually protecting them from the police. One woman later became **engaged** to one of the criminals and another developed a legal defense fund to aid in their criminal defense fees. Clearly, the **hostages had “bonded” emotionally with their captors.**

After that event, this particular psychological condition in hostage situations became known as the **“Stockholm Syndrome”**. Due to the publicity, the emotional “bonding” with captors was a familiar story in psychology. It had been recognized many years before and was found in studies of other hostage, prisoner, or abusive situations such as:

Abused **Children**
Battered/Abused Women
Prisoners of War
Cult Members
Criminal Hostage Situations
Concentration Camp Prisoners
Controlling/Intimidating **Relationships**
The **voters of a whole country** who fear their leaders

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In the final analysis, emotionally bonding with an abuser is actually a **strategy for survival** for victims of abuse and intimidation. The “Stockholm Syndrome” reaction in hostage and/or abuse situations is so well recognized at this time that police hostage negotiators no longer view it as unusual. In fact, it is **often encouraged in crime situations** as it improves the **chances for survival** of the hostages.

On the down side, it also assures that the hostages experiencing “Stockholm Syndrome” will not be very cooperative during rescue or criminal prosecution. Local law enforcement personnel have long recognized this syndrome with **battered women who fail to press charges**, bail their battering husband/boyfriend out of jail, and even physically attack police officers when they arrive to rescue them from a violent assault.

Stockholm Syndrome (SS) can also be found in family, romantic, and interpersonal relationships. The **abuser may be a husband** or wife, boyfriend or girlfriend, father or mother, or any other role in which the abuser is in a **position of control** or authority.

Why do victims support, love, and even defend their abusers and controllers?

Stockholm Syndrome **doesn't occur in every hostage** or abusive situation. In another bank robbery involving hostages, after terrorizing patrons and employees for many hours, a police sharpshooter shot and wounded the terrorizing bank robber. After he hit the floor, two women

picked him up and physically held him up to the window for another shot. The length of time one is exposed to abuse/control and other factors are certainly involved.

It has been found that **four conditions** are present that serve as a foundation for the development of Stockholm Syndrome. These four situations can be found in severe abusive relationships:

1. The presence of a **perceived threat** to one's physical or psychological survival and the belief that the abuser would carry out the threat.
2. The presence of a **perceived small kindness** from the abuser to the victim
3. **Isolation from opinions** of other than those of the abuser
4. The **perceived inability to escape** the situation

How do we (or a loved one) get out of a 'Stockholm relationship'?

Your loved one, the "victim" of the Loser/Abuser, has probably been given a choice: "If you leave me, I'll kill you".

The following are some important principles to remember in trying to help victims:

1. Remember, the more you pressure the "victim" of the Loser/Abuser, the more you prove their point. Your loved one is being told the family is trying to **ruin their wonderful relationship**.
2. Your contacts with your loved one, no matter how routine and loving, may be a **threat** to the abuser.
3. Maintain contact, remind your loved one that **you are always there to help**, and to quietly remind the controller that family and loved ones are nearby and haven't disappeared.
4. It's important that we keep a **channel open** if at all possible. The goal is to maintain contact while your loved one is involved in the controlling/abusive relationship. Remember, the goal is contact, **not pressure**.
5. Don't feel the victim's behavior is against the family or friends. It may be a form of survival or a way of lowering stress.
6. The victim **knows they are being treated badly** and/or controlled by their partner. Frequent reminders of this will only make them want less contact. Victims may slightly hint they may be considering leaving. Simply offer support. They may be exploring what support is available and be gathering information at this point, not yet ready for an exit.
7. We can get messages to people in two ways: face-to-face and the grapevine. Face-to-face seldom happens in Loser situations as controllers and abusers monitor and control contacts with others. However, the grapevine is still open. When we use the grapevine, we send a message to our loved one **through another person**.
8. As relatives or friends of a victim involved with a controller or abuser, our normal reaction is to consider dramatic action. **We become angry** and resentful at times. A rule of thumb is that any aggression toward the controller/abuser will result in additional difficulties for your loved one. A father may say: "If he's choosing that woman over his family, he can drop out of college and flip hamburgers!" Withdrawing financial support only makes your loved one **more dependent** upon the controller/abuser.

Final Thoughts

You may be the victim of a controlling and abusive partner, seeking an understanding of your feelings and attitudes. You may have a son, daughter, or friend currently involved with a controlling and abusive partner, looking for ways to understand and help.

If a loved one is involved with a Loser, a controlling and abusing partner, the long-term outcome is difficult to determine due to the many factors involved. If their relationship is in the “dating” phase, they may end the relationship on their own. If the relationship has continued for over a year, they may require **support and an exit plan** before ending the relationship. Marriage and children further complicate their ability to leave the situation. When the victim decides to end the unhappy relationship, it’s important that they view loved ones as **supportive, loving, and understanding**; not as a source of pressure, guilt, or aggression.

Reference:

This article is shortened and reproduced with approval of the author:

Dr Joseph M Carver, PhD; Love and Stockholm Syndrome: The Mystery of Loving an Abuser
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