

A zero-possibility addiction

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Looking back, I was addicted to possibilities. I think that kept me locked into a 32-year-long pattern of domestic violence. The names of my partners and a listing of their sins seems far less important to me than unraveling my part in this hideous slide show of bruises, broken promises, and ever-increasing humiliations.

Why do I say that? Because I have spent the better part of the last six months trying to figure out why this keeps coming up in my life, and why I thought it was OK to model this to the people who loved me. Asking someone who loves you to stand with you while someone puts you in bruises is as abusive as getting the bruises, in my opinion.

So first I have to look at the whys. My whys were the honeymoon period after the bruises that started with teary-eyed, oh-so-sincere promises of "no more" and "I love you." The "I-will-change possibility" and the "if-only-I-knew possibility" have nearly cost me my life. So I'm pretty clear that concrete, however boring it may seem, is far safer than the rollercoaster ride of risk and possibility.

The simple truth is if I change my script and my part in this pattern — if I don't date the same person with a different name — the bruises don't happen. If I change my part, my status as a victim of domestic violence changes to that of a survivor of domestic violence. I like the sound of that far better; I get to look in the mirror again and see a woman instead of a quivering mouse.

The reality is I am a woman of great privilege. I am a woman who has been surrounded with healthy support and loving community the whole way through this last example of what a woman shouldn't do. And that support didn't leave me in any way through that experience, even when I left the support because I was too ashamed of my own bad choices. I couldn't even look at the faces who loved me.

Having said that, I now worry about what happens to the person without that same privilege. What happens when there isn't support or safety, and the person is too scared to speak or reach out? What happens

then? There are many without that support — especially the women and men who are experiencing domestic violence and living outside.

It wouldn't be fair to say that any domestic violence experience is the same, so let's not. I went to heal where I felt safest — to the community outside. That is how healing happened for me: Relations let me know I mattered, and when I finally chose to believe them, it occurred to me that I had the responsibility to remove myself from that situation. But how?

When that realization happened, I was busily drowning in the blame game, which solves nothing. However satisfying self-righteous anger can feel in the moment (and it does), it stalls the healing process and is truly hard to be around. For me, that didn't work. So how could that stop? I went to the place I go when I am hurt, back to the urban gypsies outside. We decided together that we would help each other heal, because there didn't seem to be another way. Who knows?

There are as many solutions as people trying them, but this is the one that is beginning to work for us: looking into the faces of women who have survived with me and before me, and sitting down and looking at the different needs.

An end to the blame game is a good start, because we figured out that only people who have been beaten and degraded learn how to beat and degrade. You are only responsible for what you know, so we need to learn to change that part so we are free to explore our side in things. If there is help for both sides, perhaps healing can occur.

I know, I know. This has probably been said before. So what about mentors and free anger management classes that go to the people instead of the people having to go to the jail? What if they were free and the only requirement was participation? Would that help? Yes, we think it would. What if in every single space that unhoused folks frequent there were signs posted with the warning signs of abuse and the support needed to heal from that experience were listed along with them? What if the signs of a healthy relationship were listed right next to the

warning signs so we could see the difference and learn about those together?

We also spoke freely about what support would look like to us. First we stated the lack of judgmental attitude and victim blaming would go a hell of a lot further than pursed lips and platitudes. Then we decided that people experiencing domestic violence who live outside have slightly different needs for support than others. The domestic violence shelters are generally full up and have barriers that some can't jump past. (I will also say I have extreme gratitude to those same places for the lives they continue to save.) We simply cannot expect to be saved. We have to participate in our own healing. All of us said this.

The need for dignity and autonomy is extreme here. We cannot always get to a safe space due to issues of belongings being stolen or people telling our partners we are seeking help and why on earth would we reach out to someone we didn't know or trust for help in a situation like this. That makes no sense. But what if the advocates were members of your community, specially trained in mentorship and advocacy? What would happen then? Who knows, perhaps that might make a difference if your advocate was someone you already knew. What if we all discovered we mattered enough to look at our own side of things? What if the perpetrators were given the option of healing and changing as well without the judgment and fear? What would that look like? Is it even possible?

I'm just saying I think we need to do something different that is community-driven for the statistics on domestic violence to change. What do you think?

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