It’s My Life Now
SECOND EDITION

Starting Over After an Abusive Relationship or Domestic Violence

Meg Kennedy Dugan & Roger R. Hock
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Dedication

For our loving, supportive, and patient spouses, David S. Dugan and Diane Perin Hock. This book is also dedicated to survivors of relationship abuse and domestic violence who are, or will be, on the path toward healing.
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Introduction

This book is for survivors who have recently left abusive relationships. It is a guide to help you through your transition to a new life, a life free of abuse, violence, and fear. This can be an exciting time for you; yet, as you know, it is also a period of readjustment, insecurity, anger, confusion, self-doubt, and, often, scary reentry into a new world. These feelings may emerge immediately after the relationship, or they may take months or years to surface.

Most books, articles, and other sources of information about domestic violence focus on the abusive relationship itself: how to know if you are in one, why people stay in violent relationships, why you should leave, how to get out, and so on. Rarely is adequate consideration given to what many see as one of the most critical times for a survivor of an abusive relationship: the time after the survivor leaves.

Not all abuse is perpetrated by men against women in heterosexual relationships. Unfortunately, women sometimes abuse men, and abuse and violence also occur in gay, lesbian, and transgender relationships (these instances of abuse are specifically discussed in this second edition in chapter 6, “Abuse of Men by Women, and Abuse in Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Relationships”). However, it is important to remember that abuse by men against women is the most common form of relationship violence. Consequently, this book’s primary focus is on women as victims and survivors. This in no way negates the horror of abuse in other partnership configurations. Anyone who has suffered from relationship abuse and domestic violence will find information throughout this book relevant and helpful.
Those who have never experienced an abusive or violent relationship often believe that once survivors find their way out, all difficulties are solved: life is good, they are safe, and recovery will be swift. But survivors soon learn that leaving in itself is not the end of the nightmare. It is the beginning of a difficult, yet fulfilling and rewarding journey toward healing and happiness. This book can serve as your guide.

We have divided the book into three time frames that are relevant to the healing process for survivors of abuse: Part I, “Looking Back” (chapters 1 to 6), Part II, “Now” (chapters 7 to 11), and Part III, “Looking Forward” (chapters 12 to 17).

As you look back on your unhealthy relationship, your first step toward healing is acknowledging to yourself that you have indeed survived an abusive relationship. You may have no doubt that you were in an abusive or violent relationship. On the other hand, you may be hesitant to define your relationship in those terms. Now that you are out, feelings may be surfacing that tell you your relationship was much worse than “just difficult.” Chapter 1, “Were You in an Abusive Relationship?” assists you in reviewing the characteristics and behaviors of abusive relationships. It will help clarify the nature of your relationship and help you move forward.

The next step in your journey is ensuring your safety. As survivors of violent relationships know, abusers can be just as dangerous or pose an even greater threat after the relationship ends. Chapter 2, “Are You Out of Danger Now?” offers some guidelines for maximizing your level of personal safety. This is a crucial component in your process of emotional healing.

It’s safe to say that an epidemic of domestic violence exists. So, why isn’t more being done to reduce it? Only recently has this form of abuse received widespread attention from the media. Chapter 3, “How Could This Have Happened?” examines many of society’s expectations for men’s and women’s roles in life and relationships, which, combined, have generated an unfortunate tolerance for relationship violence. Examining gender stereotypes may help you understand how these abusive practices could have existed and been overlooked for so long.

Chapter 4, “The Hidden Horror: Sexual Abuse,” addresses the devastation of sexual violence in abusive relationships. Healing from your relationship is even more difficult if it included sexual abuse. Many survivors may not recognize or acknowledge they have been sexually abused by their partners. Rape and other forms of sexual
abuse are emotionally devastating experiences. If sexual abuse was part of the violence you experienced, you may experience an extra layer of pain and distress. You can get past this too, but some additional steps may be necessary.

Your current challenges begin with chapter 5, “How Could You Have Loved an Abuser?” which discusses a confusing and often painful obstacle in your healing process: lingering feelings of love for your ex-partner. How is this possible? You were abused! Shouldn’t this knowledge destroy any feelings of love or affection you may have once felt? Human emotions are not always “clean” and logical. In reality, many survivors of abusive and violent relationships continue to feel love for their partners after leaving. Discovering why you have these feelings and what they mean will empower you to move beyond them.

The possibility of abuse and violence exists in all intimate relationships. Chapter 6, “Abuse of Men by Women, and Abuse in Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Relationships,” new to this second edition of It’s My Life Now, focuses on those of you who do not fall into the traditional abusive-relationship roles of female as victim, male as abuser. This includes female-on-male abuse and abuse in same-sex relationships. For you, surviving and escaping your abusive partner, as well as recovering and regaining your life after leaving, often involve unique and sometimes even more difficult hurdles than those faced by survivors of the more typical male-on-female abusive relationships.

You may also notice you are experiencing a sense of loss and grief. These feelings are a normal part of losing any intimate relationship, even one that was painful and destructive. Relationships are complex, and, in some ways, violent ones are even more complex than healthy ones. Chapter 7, “Losing Your Partner, Your Dream, Your Life,” focuses on how the sense of loss you experience after an abusive relationship ends can, ironically, feel as distressing as losing a healthy relationship.

Now that you are out and in relative safety, you will begin to feel emotions that were not possible to feel when your main focus was survival. It is very common for survivors to experience intense anger, depression, and guilt after leaving an abusive relationship. Again, these feelings can be very uncomfortable and may be more difficult to work through than you expected. Nevertheless, they are a normal part of this painful transition. They are part of allowing yourself to feel again. Chapter 8, “When Feelings Overwhelm You,” will guide you through emotions that may feel too strong and will help
you regain those you have lost. Healthy emotional functioning is an important turning point on your path to recovery.

So, how much healing remains for you? What are some indicators that you still have work to do in your healing process? Chapter 9, “Signs of Unfinished Healing,” will help you take a step back and consider some emotional and behavioral signposts along your path to healing. How are you feeling about yourself? How are you interacting with others? How are you functioning on a day-to-day and even hourly basis? What activities are you enjoying? Being attentive to these thoughts and actions can help reassure you that the healing process has begun.

Sometimes, survivors need to consider other important people in their lives as they are healing. Chapter 10, “What About the Children?” focuses on children who may have been part of your abusive relationship. Most likely, they were victims too, either directly as the recipients of abuse, or indirectly as they observed the terrible events occurring in their home. Now they need support from you and protection from the violent ex-partner. You need to help them cope with what has happened. Dealing with the effects of the abuse in your children’s lives can be complicated and emotional.

After you leave a violent relationship, you hope your friends, family, and coworkers can offer the support you so desperately need. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Many people are so uncomfortable with the idea of relationship abuse that they retreat from it and from you. Others may not accept or understand what you have been through; they may even blame you. Part of your healing process is deciding which people to allow into your life. In addition, you need to be prepared to deal with those who withdraw from you, disappoint you, or are unable to offer the support you thought you could count on. Chapter 11, “The Reactions of Others,” explores the difficult process of dealing with the reactions of others in your life.

Although healing your psychological and emotional wounds is your chief concern, you may find that many external, practical matters feel equally pressing as you begin to look toward a happier future. In the aftermath of an abusive relationship, many survivors must face difficult and often complex legal and financial challenges. These may include child custody and visitation arrangements, divorce proceedings, property and support disputes, and credit hassles, to name a few. Chapter 12, “Practical Considerations,” discusses the practical considerations you may be facing and offers guidance in finding the
professional assistance you may need. Handling these issues effectively will help keep them from interfering with your healing.

What specific steps should you take toward emotional healing? Chapter 13, “Beginning to Heal,” focuses on three of the most incapacitating emotions most domestic violence survivors face: anger, depression, and anxiety. It is important for you to recognize these feelings, assess the extent to which they may be affecting you, and take the appropriate actions to address them. You may find that you are perfectly capable of dealing with your intense emotions on your own. However, many survivors whose emotions begin to interfere with healing and moving on with their lives find that their healing process benefits greatly from the guidance of a trained professional counselor.

A major casualty of abuse is self-esteem. Many survivors judge themselves unworthy of love and respect. Rebuilding self-esteem begins with careful assessment of who you are now and whom you want to become. Chapter 14, “Believing in Yourself,” will assist you in examining your feelings and perceptions about yourself. As you begin to reestablish a positive self-concept, you will realize you deserve much more from a partner. You deserve to be treated with respect and kindness. It’s not about finding a perfect, fairy-tale life. It is about knowing what you can and should expect from an intimate relationship and making sure that you get it.

For some survivors, one of the most confusing issues following an abusive relationship is the temptation to return to an abuser. Your ex-partner wants you to come back and is probably saying all the “right” things about changing, being so sorry, and how it will never happen again. Sometimes those words can sound so convincing! In fact, you may have left in the past, only to return to watch the tension build and the abuse and violence begin again. Your friends and relatives are stunned, anxious, and disbelieving when you mention you are thinking of going back. Chapter 15, “The Temptation to Go Back,” examines the reasons why you may be tempted at times to return to your abuser. It also helps remind you of the reasons why you left. Making the right decision about returning to an abusive partner is a crucial step in regaining control over your life.

One of the most complicated and painful situations in the aftermath of an abusive relationship is an ex-partner who is still in your life. If you had children together, you may still have contact, either in person or indirectly through your children. If you live in the same community, you may run into your abuser now and then in any
number of circumstances. Chapter 16, “Is Your Abuser Still in Your Life?” will help you anticipate these contacts, maintain your safety, and protect yourself from further pain and abuse.

Can you ever love again? The answer is yes! However, a destructive relationship usually leaves the survivor with the very real fear of repeating the cycle. Healing from the abuse and moving on involve recognizing and avoiding potentially unhealthy relationships. Finding love again as a survivor of relationship abuse or domestic violence is the theme of chapter 17, “Loving Again.”

You are not alone. Many others have survived abuse and violence and regained their lives. Because abusive relationships are so terribly common, many sources of help and information are available to you as you travel along your difficult postrelationship path. The “Resources” section at the end of the book offers Internet sites and telephone hotlines to assist you in finding the support you may want and need.

Your new life may seem frightening, confusing, and overwhelming right now, but you are probably farther along the path to healing than you think. It is possible to believe in yourself, have a healthy intimate relationship, and be happy. Although the road may seem long and your destination may not be in sight quite yet, it exists. It is just around the corner.

Caution: As you are reading this book, you may find an increase in intensity of certain symptoms resulting from your experience of abuse. Additionally, you may sense the appearance of new, uncomfortable symptoms. These are usually signs that healing is taking place. However, if, as you read through these chapters and work on the Self-Exploration exercises, you begin to feel more depressed, anxious, or angry, or if you begin to question your control over your emotions, you may need to consider obtaining professional counseling to help you take full advantage of this book and begin to move forward in your life.

You should also be aware that parts of this book may be more difficult for some of you than for others. Many survivors, as a result of the abuse, may find problems with their ability to gauge correctly their own and others’ emotions and actions. Many survivors require a somewhat longer time period to process information; their memory may be a bit impaired temporarily; and they may have difficulty judging when people are angry, sad, or otherwise distressed. In addition, some survivors experience a period of numbness, as though they are out of touch with their own emotions.
If you find these issues are preventing you from working on your healing process, you may want to take some time to calm your troubling emotions before setting out on your journey through this book. Some very basic techniques may help with this, including creating a more structured and predictable routine for yourself; relaxation and breathing techniques; going for walks or other mild physical exercise; or working to “slow down” a bit in your day-to-day, minute-to-minute life. For example: Here’s one technique that many people find helpful when they feel that life or their emotions are becoming overwhelming. It’s called progressive muscle relaxation.

Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) is a proven technique for reducing tension in your body. PMR involves tensing and relaxing muscle groups throughout your body, one group at a time. It can be particularly helpful if you store stress in your body. It is also especially helpful when you are having difficulty falling asleep at night. It’s best if you can listen to the following instructions while you are relaxing, so you might want to record this text or have a friend read it to you.

Sit in a comfortable chair or lie on the floor or a bed. Begin the process by tensing your right foot and holding that tension for a slow count of five. Then release the tension in your foot and completely relax it for another count of five. Next, tense the muscles of your right ankle for a count of five and relax it for a count of five. Now tense, then release, your right calf muscles in the same way. After you finish tensing and relaxing all the muscles in your right leg, move onto your left foot and leg. Slowly continue this progressive tensing and releasing of individual muscle groups until you have covered your entire body from your toes to your scalp. The chart below will guide you through all your muscle groups in the recommended sequence.

Be sure to include all of the following areas when performing PMR techniques. For each muscle group, remember to tense and relax for a count of five each.

- Right foot
- Right ankle
- Right calf
- Right thigh
- Left foot
- Left ankle
- Left calf
- Left thigh
- Buttocks
- Back
- Stomach
- Chest
• Right hand
• Right wrist
• Right forearm
• Right biceps
• Left hand
• Left wrist
• Left forearm
• Left biceps
• Shoulders
• Neck
• Face
• Jaw
• Tongue
• Forehead
• Scalp

Be sure to include every muscle group. Do not rush through the process by tightening your entire leg or arm. Take each individual part separately. For example, tense and release your hand, then your wrist, then your forearm, and then your biceps.

Try PMR for a few weeks. As with all relaxation techniques, it might take a while to learn to relax completely. If unwanted thoughts enter your mind as you are going through the process, gently push them out and focus on your body. Do not become angry or upset if you lose your focus. It takes time, but once you are skilled at PMR, it can be a great weapon against stress.

**Note:** The quotes at the beginning of each chapter represent actual comments from survivors of relationship abuse and domestic violence. However, the names have been changed and, in some cases, paraphrasing has been used to ensure confidentiality and protect the identities of the survivors concerned.
SELF-EXPLORATION
Healing in Progress

Where will you be in five years?

A helpful way to assess your perception of the future is to imagine in some detail where your life will be in five years. The following exercise will help you consider your goals and your belief in your ability to obtain them. Describe as much as you can about how you see your life five years from now in each of the following categories.

**Note:** The time needed to heal varies from person to person. Many of the exercises in this book suggest that you repeat them in about a month. However, you should feel free to extend that interval to six weeks, two months, or even six months if it better fits your personal pace of healing. It is also perfectly appropriate to repeat the exercises more than once each month if you wish.

**Job or Career**

_________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________

**Intimate Relationship**

_________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________

**Family Life**

_________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________
Friendships

Physical Appearance

Other Issues that Apply to You Personally

1.

2.

3.

Now that you have finished describing your perceived future, spend some time reviewing it. How does it make you feel? Do you feel happy and enthusiastic about the future you envision? If you do, that's great! You are on the right track. On the other hand, if you feel discouraged by your view of where your life is going, you need to work on starting over and healing from the abuse. We recommend that you repeat this exercise in about a month and periodically throughout your healing process. Comparing your answers over time will allow you to see changes and progress in your views about yourself, your life, and your healing. We wish you all the best on your journey to your new life.

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PART

Looking Back
Were You in an Abusive Relationship?

I’d heard a lot about abusive relationships, but I didn’t think it applied to my situation. There were a lot of good times.

Mary, age 20

I never thought it would happen to me. I come from a good family, no abuse, and no neglect. My family and friends loved him. I figured the problem was me.

Sharon, age 32

Myth: A relationship is only abusive if it involves physical violence.
Myth: All people who become involved in abusive relationships grew up in abusive families.
Myth: Victims who don’t leave an abusive relationship right away must have something wrong with them.
No one has ever developed a single definition of relationship abuse. Each intimate relationship is unique and each abusive intimate relationship is unique too. However, as you look back on your relationship, you will discover certain signs, clues, and characteristics that should help you decide if yours was an unhealthy or abusive relationship. Two significant indicators are common to virtually all cases of relationship abuse.

Defining Abuse

First, relationship abuse usually involves a pattern of abusive events. Except in rare cases, a single incident usually does not constitute abuse. Instead, victims typically experience a repetitive, cyclic pattern of destructive or violent behaviors that tend to escalate over time.

Second, abusive relationships are based on power and control. The abuser’s goal is to insure that he is in complete control of you and of the relationship. Your ex-partner’s controlling tactics may be subtle and not easily recognized. You may have thought that his taking control of your time, friends, and daily activities was a sign of caring or wanting only the best for you. As time went by, however, the control you once had over your life disappeared. Gradually, using a wide range of strategies, your ex was able to render you powerless and place himself in control of the relationship.

Although all abusive relationships share these two characteristics, the specific behaviors used by abusers to achieve their goals vary greatly. At the beginning of your relationship, you may not have even noticed the negative behaviors. You may have even felt that some of the behaviors seemed loving and attentive. Your ex-partner was so jealous of your time it seemed extreme, but he convinced you it was because of how much he loved you. Your ex was probably around virtually all the time and told you that he couldn’t stand to be without you. He seemed to put you on a pedestal. The relationship developed quickly and when you were not together, he frequently called or e-mailed you. You may have thought at the time that this was the best relationship of your life.

Slowly, however, some of those wonderful things began to change. Perhaps you felt as if your ex-partner wanted to move ahead in the relationship too quickly. He may have pressured you into spending all your time together to the exclusion of other friends and family members. After the times you were apart, he constantly asked where
you had been and what you had been doing. And sometimes this questioning may have erupted into outbursts of anger and jealousy.

Next, you may have noticed that your ex was becoming more critical of you. The criticism may have been about whom you went out with, the way you dressed, how you paid the bills, or how you decorated your home. Each time, he followed the criticism by saying he was only telling you these things to “help you.” And each time your ex once again professed love for you.

At this point, you may have grown a bit concerned, but probably passed it off as some sort of stress your abuser was under. He apologized for the jealous outbursts and promised it would never happen again. He convinced you not to worry. But as the criticism continued, you may also have begun to feel critical of yourself and your own activities.

Slowly, you began to realize that the troubling behavior was not going away; it was getting worse; it was becoming abusive. Still, even as this negative behavior increased, you might not have recognized it as abuse. You may not have liked what your ex-partner did or said to you; you may have felt hurt and unhappy, but you rationalized it as a “normal” part of a relationship; a problem that the two of you would work out somehow. Or you may have felt you were somehow to blame and if you could just figure out how to change yourself, your abuser’s behavior toward you would change as well.

As the relationship continued, you probably read or heard stories about domestic violence and abuse. These were usually horrific stories such as a victim who was murdered by a partner or a victim whose partner’s violence sent her repeatedly to the emergency room. These extreme examples of abuse may have made it even more difficult for you to label what was happening in your relationship as abuse. The abuse in your own life may have taken forms that were initially much less obvious. Whether or not you experienced physical abuse, you may have been the victim of verbal, emotional, sexual, or spiritual abuse. You may have never experienced any physical violence at all, and yet you survived an extremely abusive relationship.

If you were the victim of abuse in childhood or in an earlier relationship, the process of recognizing the abuse may have been a bit different. If all you had ever known were abusive relationships, you may have had extra difficulty recognizing a problem existed. If you had been abused in previous relationships, you may have hoped this one would be better, but you may not have even realized what constituted a healthy, nonabusive relationship.
Because of your past abusive experiences, you may have believed you were just overreacting. Your abuser may have used his knowledge of your past abuse to minimize the seriousness of his own abusive behaviors. Your ex may have pointed out all the “nice” things he did for you and how you were imagining these problems because you were “oversensitive.” You may have needed a very long time to realize that this was indeed abuse, that it was wrong; and that you deserved better.

Moreover, part of the problem victims often have in identifying an unhealthy relationship or a violent partner is that no abusive relationship is abusive all the time. Instead, the abuse or violence tends to occur in a cycle, alternating between good times and terrible times. This is commonly referred to as the “cycle of abuse;” The cycle consists of what is called a “honeymoon” phase, a “tension-building phase,” an abusive “explosion,” followed by a return to a “honeymoon.” This pattern then repeats itself over and over.

The Cycle of Abuse

For some victims, the cycle of abuse disguises an abusive relationship until the violence becomes extreme. This is because, typically, the abuse increases very gradually over time, making it difficult to recognize exactly where or when it began. Even if a relationship is frequently violent, there are usually periods when no overt violence is occurring. The violence and abuse typically follow a fairly predictable pattern, or cycle. If you had never been abused before, it may not have crossed your mind that there was any reason for concern. However, after a while, something happened that created tension to build between you and your partner. It may have been a simple difference of opinion, a disagreement over a purchase or an activity, or just an argument about a controversial subject. Whatever the issue, it didn’t seem like a big deal, but it disrupted the harmony in your new relationship. You expected that the problem would be resolved by talking about it, by working it out between the two of you. However, that didn’t happen and the tension persisted. The only way you were able to regain the harmony was to “give in” to his position. You probably felt unheard and discounted by your abuser, but it seemed really no big deal and if “giving in” ended the discord, it was worth it. So, after you found a way, at least on the surface, to make the problem go away, the loving, harmonious atmosphere returned. The “honeymoon” phase of the cycle was beginning again.
The Healthy Relationship

But it was only the beginning. After a while another event occurred that once again created tension between you. The same thing happened again only this time there was an explosion: Your ex-partner yelled at you, ridiculed you, threatened you, insulted you, or carried out some other abusive acts. You were caught off guard and you did whatever you had to do to calm things down. And then, again, for days, weeks, and even months, things were good again; the “honeymoon” returned.

As time passed, this cycle continued, and each time the explosion was worse. The tension always ended in abuse. What began as insults became threats of physical violence or violent acts. Always after the abuse, the “honeymoon” would begin again. Your ex-partner said he was sorry, apologized, promised it would never happen again, and
asked for forgiveness. He was repentant; and maybe even bought you flowers or other gifts. You felt a strong need to make things better and would do everything humanly possible to restore the peace. Things would settle down although you began to feel that even in these “good” times you were always walking on eggshells, constantly worried about the next abusive outburst. Nevertheless, compared to the other phases of the cycle, this felt like a honeymoon, and you hoped it would last. But it didn’t.

An alternative way to visualize the cycle is to think of a roller coaster. During the “highs” you felt on top of the world, but at the lowest points you couldn’t see any way out. Each time you started that long “free fall” toward the explosion, you never knew what frightening events would be next. After the explosion, the terrible “ride” would begin again.

Emotional Abuse

If you are like many women who have survived an abusive relationship, you may find that, paradoxically, the physical abuse feels somehow less damaging in the long run than the emotional abuse you endured. Emotional abuse is so insidious and psychologically devastating that it can take the longest time to heal. Bruises, cuts, or even broken bones often mend faster than the wounds of emotional abuse. Your partner probably had many strategies to take control of and manipulate your feelings and emotions.

Did your abuser make you feel unworthy of love? Did he work to convince you that you were stupid, ugly, or fat? Through these tactics, your ex persuaded you that no one would ever find someone like
you attractive. By doing this, he was working to guarantee that you would stay with him.

Did your abuser make you feel that the abuse was really all your fault? He probably tried to make you believe that something must be wrong with you because, otherwise, the abuse would stop. You came to believe that if you were only more patient, better organized, a better lover, or somehow different, the abuse would stop. But no matter what you did, the abuse continued. You slowly began to feel worthless, hopeless, and helpless.

After each incident of abuse, your partner probably tried to make it seem as though you caused it. It may have gone something like this: “I’m so sorry but if only you hadn’t …” This created a way to seem repentant while telling you it was all your fault.

Your ex-partner may have threatened you if you didn’t do exactly what he wanted. Threats can be a devastating form of emotional abuse. Sometimes an abuser’s threats are overt and clear: “The next time I see you talking to him again, I’ll fix it so you’ll never talk again.” Other threats, though, can be more veiled and subtle: “Sure, go ahead and go out tonight, but I hope your cat will be OK while you’re gone.”

Also, your abuser probably minimized the extent of the abuse in numerous ways. After an assault he may have told you that it wasn’t all that bad; that you didn’t look very damaged; that you were just a big baby. This tactic had the power of making you feel as though you were exaggerating the incident, but also let you know that if this wasn’t “all that bad,” much worse things were possible.

Here is a partial list of actions that constitute emotional abuse:

- Entitlement (“I have a right to sex”; “I expect you to do what I say.”)
- Withholding (“I don’t need to tell you what I’m thinking or feeling”; “Why would I want to make love with someone like you?”)
- Emotionally misrepresenting (“You’re not hurt, what a joke. You’re just being too sensitive.”)
- Not taking care of himself (doing drugs, engaging in high-risk behaviors such as driving recklessly, not seeking medical care, not bathing)
- Withholding help (with money, chores, childcare)
- Acting out excessive jealousy
- Threatening self-injury or suicide
• Threatening to hurt or kill you, your friends, relatives, or pets
• Controlling you (taking control of where you go, whom you see, what you do, all the decisions in your life, both the life you shared and your own life)

Verbal Abuse
Your partner may have abused you with words rather than, or in addition to, physical or emotional violence. Attacks of verbal abuse may have been directed at you face to face, or might have been in the form of negative, degrading comments about you to others. Your partner may have belittled and humiliated you in front of others or suggested to others that you were being unfaithful to him, even though this was not true.

Verbal abuse can be extremely painful, and its damaging effects long lasting. As with physical violence, verbal abuse can take many different forms, but the result was to change your view of yourself. It may have been designed to make you feel afraid and powerless. It may have focused on making you feel worthless and somehow to blame for what your ex was doing to you. It may have also been intended to convince you that you were small, unworthy, unattractive, stupid, insensitive, and so on, and that no one but him would ever love you (see previous section, “Emotional Abuse”).

Here is a partial list of behaviors that are included in verbal abuse:

• Yelling
• Ridiculing
• Accusing
• Blaming
• Sarcasm
• Disparaging your ideas
• Threatening
• Name-calling
• Insulting
• Belittling
• Scorn
• Rejecting your opinions
• Intimidating
• Criticizing
• Humiliating
• Mocking
• Put-downs
• Trivializing your needs and desires

Spiritual Abuse
Your partner may have found ways to exert control over you by exploiting ideas that are sacred to you: your spirituality, your personal values, and your philosophical beliefs. Did your ex ever try to use religious writings to convince you that his abusive actions were OK? He may have quoted passages from your religion’s sacred writings or your valued philosophical texts and interpreted them to imply that you were his property; that you were supposed to abide by his
needs, and submit to his authority and power; that if you disobeyed, you should be punished. No matter what spiritual convictions you hold precious, your abuser may have attempted to minimize them, thereby minimizing you.

In addition to using your religious beliefs against you, your abuser may have denigrated nonreligious principles that are sacred to you. These are beliefs that may be an integral part of your upbringing and a solid part of who you are. Your convictions about your relationship to other people, to animals, or to the environment are a few of the beliefs that may have been fodder for his abuse.

Here are some examples of spiritual abuse:

- Trivializing your ideas, opinions, views, and desires
- Discrediting your values as unimportant, silly, or unrealistic
- Stating that his beliefs are the only “right” beliefs
- Using sacred texts to justify the abuse
- Using religion to justify the controlling behaviors
- Denying your religious beliefs
- Preventing you from attending religious services or participating in sacred ceremonies
- Preventing you from observing holy days and rituals
- Ridiculing your religion and religious beliefs
- Intimidating you with religion (“If you don’t do as I say, you’ll go to hell.”)
- Defiling or destroying books and other materials that represent your philosophical value systems
- Denouncing or rejecting your cultural or ethnic heritage

Physical Abuse

During the relationship you may have experienced physical violence that you didn’t label as abuse at the time. Not all physical abuse entails broken bones, bleeding, or stitches. Most relationship violence causes damage that others cannot see, so they don’t even know it has occurred. Abusers become experts at it. Just think, if your friends, family, and coworkers could see the signs of your abuse on a daily or weekly basis, his secret would be out.

Your partner may have pushed or shoved or grabbed you to keep you from leaving the room. He may have twisted your arm sufficiently to cause real pain, but didn’t leave a noticeable mark. If your ex threw you against a wall or pushed you to the floor, no one else would have known. Maybe your ex strangled you so hard you were
gasp for breath, but didn’t leave any marks that would allow others to suspect what was really going on. When he did hit you hard enough to leave bruises, he was careful to hit you only on parts of your body that others would not see.

Below is a partial list of examples of physical abuse:

- Pushing
- Grabbing
- Punching
- Pinching
- Hitting with objects
- Physically restraining (holding you down, pinning you against a wall, preventing you from moving or leaving, etc.)
- Rape and other sexual coercive acts (see chapter 4, “The Hidden Horror: Sexual Abuse”)
- Physical intimidation (towering over you, blocking your exit, waving his fist, etc.)

A clear understanding of the many forms of relationship abuse and the specific behaviors involved should be helpful in removing all doubt that you were indeed in such a relationship. But beyond these behaviors is the bigger picture of the relationship itself and the process by which the abuse began, continued, and escalated over time.

Why You Stayed

People have probably asked you, “Why didn’t you just leave?” Those who have never been in an abusive relationship often find it very difficult to understand how hard it may have been to escape.

You know all too well there were many reasons you didn’t get out sooner. Your ex promised to change. You wanted to believe him. You may have thought you just needed to try a bit harder.

Perhaps every time there was an incident of abuse, your abuser told you that it was due to some problem of his: depression, abuse suffered in the past, stress at work. You may have thought that if only you could help get the help he needed for those problems, things would be better.

Perhaps your ex-partner blamed all the abuse on his drinking or other drug abuse. You repeatedly tried to get him help for his alcohol or other drug problems but nothing ever seemed to work. If it did work, you found that although the abuse may have become more subtle, it remained even after the substance abuse stopped.
You also may have worried that if you were to leave, what would you do for money? You may have become dependent upon him for your financial needs. Your ex may have manipulated it so his name alone was on all the bank accounts.

Leaving might have meant that your children would not have both parents in their lives. Your ex-partner may have told you that you would never get custody of the children. You were convinced that you could lose your children if you left, or that your kids needed two parents in their lives.

How many times had your ex told you that you were useless, stupid, or ugly and that no one else would ever want you? To you, leaving him meant that if he was right, you might be alone for the rest of your life.

And there were the threats. “If you ever leave me…” Your abuser had always followed through on his threats in the past. You believed he would follow through on these threats as well, even if he threatened to kill you.

Or, perhaps it was because of how much you cared for him.

How Could You Have Become So Attached to Your Abuser?

You may have asked yourself how it was possible for you to have become so strongly attached to your abuser despite the abuse you suffered. If this was not your first serious relationship, you may feel that, paradoxically, this attachment was somehow stronger and more difficult to break than previous nonabusive relationships. How could this be?

Traumatic Bonding

Traumatic bonding is a theory that tries to explain why abusive relationships create such a powerful connection. Several factors have been identified that must be present for such a bond to form. First, for traumatic bonding to take place a relationship must contain an imbalance of power. Power has different meanings to different people, but generally it means that one partner is much more in control of key aspects of the relationship. If your partner made all or most of the decisions, controlled the finances, set himself up as the only “authority,” intimidated you through threats or violence, or made you feel powerless in other ways, the power in your relationship was completely lopsided.
The second factor in traumatic bonding is the sporadic nature of the abusive behavior as was discussed earlier relative to the cycle of abuse. In most abusive relationships, the bad times are intermingled with the good times. The abuse is usually preceded and followed by very loving, giving periods. This pattern of on-again, off-again abuse and affection is the strongest form of reinforcement.

The third factor in traumatic bonding involves a kind of denial. For emotional self-protection, you told yourself, “It isn’t really all that bad.” You devised “excuses” to make the situation seem somehow better than it actually was. You may even have altered your attitudes about the violence itself or found new ways of thinking that disguised the truth from yourself. You may have convinced yourself that your ex-partner had every right to treat you that way because you were late with dinner, forgot to pick up the dry cleaning, or didn’t get home exactly on time. You may have thought that if the violence didn’t send you to the hospital, it wasn’t truly abuse.

Even beyond this, if the abuse was severe, you may have found ways of escaping the violence as it happened by imagining you were outside of your body, looking down on the terrible scene that was occurring. This is another psychological protection strategy called dissociation, and it is a powerful tool to create distance between yourself and the violence. Dissociation is discussed further in chapter 9, “Signs of Unfinished Healing.”

These forms of denial and distancing are forms of what psychologists call cognitive dissonance. In the case of abusive relationships, cognitive dissonance means that what was happening to you was so horrible, so far removed from your thoughts and expectations about the world, that it was dissonant, “out of tune,” with reality. Because you were powerless to change the situation, you relied on internal, emotional strategies to try to make it less dissonant, to make it somehow fit. In other words, to survive, you literally had to change how you perceived reality.

The last factor in traumatic bonding involves masking the abuse. You may not have admitted the abuse to anyone, including yourself. Or, as often happens, you may have escaped from it through alcohol or other drugs. Drinking or using other drugs may have been a way for you to self-medicate. While “medicated,” it seemed easier, both mentally and emotionally, to hide from the abuse or violence. It might have also been another way to deny that the problem was abuse and blame the abusive behavior instead on drugs.
These four elements: unequal power, intermittent abuse, cognitive dissonance, and masking techniques, often combine to create a traumatic bond with an abuser. Once this bond is established it becomes terribly difficult to break free of the relationship.

The Stockholm Syndrome
The Stockholm syndrome is another theory about how a person who is being victimized may develop an attachment to an aggressor. This theory grew out of a case in Sweden in 1973 in which bank robbers had held a woman and three others hostage for six days. When they were finally released, the female hostage found she had developed a strong attachment, almost an infatuation, with her captor.

The Stockholm syndrome also assumes four conditions exist that are similar, but not identical to traumatic bonding. One, victims are threatened with death or great physical harm and perceive the perpetrator capable of acting on these threats. Two, victims see no means of escape and, therefore, perceive that their lives depend on the captor. Three, victims feel isolated and hold little hope for outside intervention from family or friends, and, four, the victimizer offers kindness along with the violence, which increases the victims’ perception of complete helplessness and dependence on the captor.

This syndrome has, in the decades since the original case, been applied to many victim–victimizer situations. It applies painfully well to abusive relationships where most, if not all, of these conditions often exist. When the syndrome emerges in such relationships, the victim clings to the abuser because that becomes her only hope of survival. This bond, however unhealthy, can sometimes feel stronger even than a bond that grows out of love in a healthy relationship.

Conclusion
An understanding of the behaviors that comprise abuse, as well as a working knowledge of the cycle of abuse, traumatic bonding, and the Stockholm syndrome, will help you become more confident that you were in an abusive relationship. It should also help shed light on why you may have struggled so much to leave your abuser and why you stayed in the relationship as long as you did.
SELF-EXPLORATION I
Abusive Behaviors Inventory

If you are still wondering if your relationship was abusive, try taking the following quiz. Beside each behavior that applied to your partner, put a checkmark.

Check each of the following that happened on a recurring basis:

_____ Yelled  _____ Did all the daily planning
_____ Called you names  _____ Controlled all the finances
_____ Criticized  _____ Unfairly blamed you
_____ Checked up on you  _____ Put you down
_____ Showed up unexpectedly  _____ Didn’t pay attention to you
_____ Didn’t give any emotional support
_____ Always kept track of where you were

Check each of the following that happened one or more times:

_____ Threatened
_____ Told you whom you could and could not see
_____ Isolated you from your family
_____ Said he is always “right”
_____ “Towered” over you  _____ Threatened you with violence
_____ Slapped you  _____ Followed you around
_____ Grabbed you  _____ Kicked you
_____ Restrained you  _____ Choked you
_____ Pushed you  _____ Forced sex

If you find that you checked any of these behaviors, you were in an abusive relationship. Not all relationships are “equally” abusive but all are very painful and destructive in their own way. Although some behaviors are clearly more abusive than others, in general, the more checks, the more abusive the relationship.

This first exercise helped you to identify the abusive behaviors you endured. The next part allows you the opportunity to analyze the effects of these more deeply.
SELF-EXPLORATION II
Abusive Behaviors Analysis

Now, for the following items, explain or analyze briefly how the abusive behaviors affected you.

• List what, if anything, your partner said or did to you to make you feel bad about yourself. Examples of these would be calling you names, telling you that you are stupid or not attractive, or putting you down either to your face or to others. Explain briefly how those behaviors made you feel.

_______________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________

• List the ways, if any, that your ex-partner used to control your relationship. Examples of these would include having the final say in all financial matters, deciding with whom and when you would visit friends or family, what you do, and where you go by yourself or as a couple.

_______________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________

• Explain what effects his control had over your life at the time.

_______________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________
• List what, if anything, your partner said or did that made you think you had no choice but to stay with him. Examples here might be saying that you would never see the kids if you left, no one would believe you about the abuse, or that the abuse would get worse if you ever tried to leave.

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________

• Explain what effects the ability to keep you in the relationship had at the time, such as keeping you from seeing your family, preventing you from going to school, or causing you to lose your job.

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________

• List what, if anything, your partner said or did that made you feel unlovable. Examples include telling you that you were ugly or stupid; you didn’t know how to treat a partner; you were a bad lover, and so on.

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________
• Explain what effects his telling you that you were unlovable had over your life at the time. Examples would include isolating you from friends, lowering your self-esteem, or making you believe that you were ugly, stupid, or lazy.

• List what, if anything, your partner said or did to make you feel unsafe or threatened. Examples include increasing levels of violence, promising to find you no matter where you went, making overt threats of injury or death.

• Explain what effects instilling fear in you had over your life at the time. Examples include staying in the relationship, doing everything according to your partner’s wishes, or always being afraid of being injured.

These deeper analyses and explanations should help you determine if you were in an abusive relationship. The extent to which the behaviors had a negative impact on you helps confirm that you were in an abusive relationship.