



Trauma
Care

Newsletter

TraumaCare

Box 1807, Magaliesview, 2067

5a Franshoek Rd, Lonehill

Tel: 0715929690

Website: www.traumacare.co.za

Email: mail@traumacare.co.za

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Stockholm Syndrome Loving an Abuser

People are often amazed at their own psychological conditions and reactions. Those with depression are stunned when they remember they've thought of killing themselves. Patients recovering from severe psychiatric disturbances are often shocked as they remember their symptoms and behavior during the episode. A patient with Bipolar Disorder recently told me "I can't believe I thought I could change the weather through mental telepathy!" A common reaction is "I can't believe I did that!"

In clinical practice, some of the most surprised and shocked individuals are those who have been involved in controlling and abusive relationships. When the relationship 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 "I know it sounds crazy, but I miss her". Recently I've heard "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!

While the psychological condition in hostage situations became known as "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
- Controlling/Intimidating Relationships



Ignacio J. Nunez
Child Abuse



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.

It’s important to understand the components of Stockholm Syndrome as they relate to abusive and controlling relationships. Once the syndrome is understood, it’s easier to understand why victims support, love, and even defend their abusers and controllers.

Every syndrome has symptoms or behaviors and Stockholm Syndrome is no exception. While a clear-cut list has not been established due to varying opinions by researchers and experts, several of these features will be present:

- Positive feelings by the victim toward the abuser/controller
- Negative feelings by the victim toward family, friends, or authorities trying to rescue/support them or win their release
- Support of the abuser’s reasons and behaviors
- Positive feelings by the abuser toward the victim
- Supportive behaviors by the victim, at times helping the abuser
- Inability to engage in behaviors that may assist in their release or detachment



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

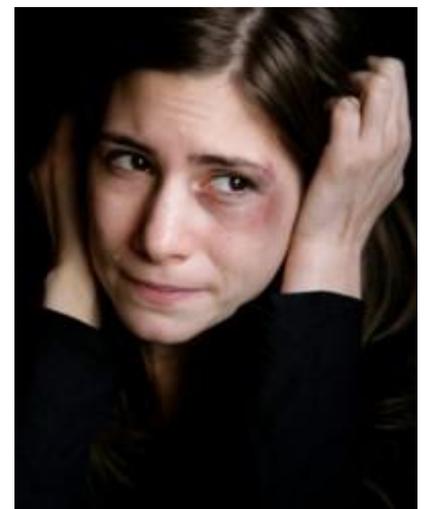
- The presence of a perceived threat to one's physical or psychological survival and the belief that the abuser would carry out the threat.
- The presence of a perceived small kindness from the abuser to the victim
- Isolation from perspectives other than those of the abuser
- The perceived inability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

By considering each situation we can understand how Stockholm Syndrome develops in romantic relationships:

Perceived threat to one's physical/psychological survival

The abuser assures us that only our cooperation keeps our loved ones safe. Indirectly, the abuser/controller offers subtle threats that you will never leave them or have another partner, reminding you that people in the past have paid dearly for not following their wishes. Hints are often offered such as "I know people who can make others disappear".

Witnessing violence or aggression is also a perceived threat. Witnessing a violent temper directed at a television set, others on the highway, or a third party clearly sends us the message that we could be the next target for violence. Witnessing the thoughts and attitudes of the abuser/controller is threatening and intimidating, knowing that we will be the target of those thoughts in the future.



The "Small Kindness" Perception

In threatening and survival situations, we look for evidence of hope – a small sign that the situation may improve. When an abuser/controller shows the victim some small kindness, even though it is to the abusers benefit as well, the victim interprets that small kindness as a positive trait of the captor.

In relationships with abusers, a birthday card, a gift (usually provided after a period of abuse), or a special treat are interpreted as not only positive, but evidence that the abuser is not "all bad" and may at some time correct his/her behavior. Abusers and controllers are often given positive credit for not abusing their partner, when the partner would have normally been subjected to verbal or physical abuse in a certain situation. An aggressive and jealous partner may normally become intimidating or abusive in certain social situations, as when an opposite-sex coworker waves in a crowd.

Similar to the small kindness perception is the perception of a "**soft side**". During the relationship, the abuser/controller may share information about their past – how they were mistreated, abused, neglected, or wronged. The victim begins to feel the abuser/controller may be capable of fixing their behavior or worse yet, that they (abuser) may also be a "victim". Sympathy may develop toward the abuser... "I know he fractured my jaw and ribs...but he's troubled. He had a rough childhood!"

Isolation from Perspectives Other than those of the Captor

In abusive and controlling relationships, the victim has the sense they are always "walking on eggshells" – fearful of saying or doing anything that might prompt a violent/intimidating outburst. For their survival, they begin to see the world through the abuser's perspective. They begin to fix things that might prompt an

outburst, act in ways they know makes the abuser happy, or avoid aspects of their own life that may prompt a problem. We become preoccupied with the needs, desires, and habits of the abuser/controller.

The abuser is already angry and resentful toward anyone who would provide the victim support, typically using multiple methods and manipulations to isolate the victim from others. At this point, victims curse their parents and friends, tell them not to call and stop interfering, and break off communication with others. Agreeing with the abuser/controller, supportive others are now viewed as “causing trouble” and must be avoided. Many victims threaten their family and friends with restraining orders if they continue to “interfere” or try to help the victim in their situation.

In severe cases of Stockholm Syndrome in relationships, the victim may have difficulty leaving the abuser and may actually feel the abusive situation is their fault.



Perceived Inability to Escape

Many abusive/controlling relationships feel like till-death-do-us-part relationships – locked together by mutual financial issues/assets, mutual intimate knowledge, or legal situations. Here are some common situations:

- Controlling partners have increased the financial obligations/debt in the relationship to the point that neither partner can financially survive on their own.
- The Controller often uses extreme threats including threatening to take the children out of state, threatening to quit their job/business rather than pay alimony/support, threatening public exposure of the victim’s personal issues, or assuring the victim they will never have a peaceful life due to nonstop harassment.
- Controllers often keep the victim locked into the relationship with severe guilt – threatening suicide if the victim leaves.
- In relationships with an abuser or controller, the victim has also experienced a loss of self-esteem, self-confidence, and psychological energy. The victim may feel “burned out” and too depressed to leave.
- In teens and young adults, victims may be attracted to a controlling individual when they feel inexperienced, insecure, and overwhelmed by a change in their life situation.

Stockholm Syndrome produces an unhealthy bond with the controller and abuser. It is the reason many victims continue to support an abuser after the relationship is over. It's also the reason they continue to see "the good side" of an abusive individual and appear sympathetic to someone who has mentally and sometimes physically abused them. Studies tell us we are more loyal and committed to something that is difficult, uncomfortable, and even humiliating. Every couple, no matter how mismatched, falls in love in the movies after going through a terrorist takeover, being stalked by a killer, being stranded on an island, or being involved in an alien abduction. Investment and an ordeal are ingredients for a strong bonding – even if the bonding is unhealthy. No one bonds or falls in love by being a member of the Automobile Club or a music CD club. Struggling to survive on a deserted island – you bet!



Several types of investments keep us in the bad relationship:

- Emotional Investment – We've invested so many emotions, cried so much, and worried so much that we feel we must see the relationship through to the finish.
- Social Investment – We've got our pride! To avoid social embarrassment and uncomfortable social situations, we remain in the relationship.
- Family Investments – If children are present in the relationship, decisions regarding the relationship are clouded by the status and needs of the children.
- Financial Investment – In many cases, the controlling and abusive partner has created a complex financial situation. Many victims remain in a bad relationship, waiting for a better financial situation to develop that would make their departure and detachment easier.
- Lifestyle Investment – Many controlling/abusive partners use money or a lifestyle as an investment. Victims in this situation may not want to lose their current lifestyle.
- Intimacy Investment – We often invest emotional and sexual intimacy. Some victims have experienced a destruction of their emotional and/or sexual self-esteem in the unhealthy relationship. The abusing partner may threaten to spread rumors or tell intimate details or secrets. A type of blackmail using intimacy is often found in these situations.

In many cases, it's not simply our feelings for an individual that keeps us in an unhealthy relationship - it's often the amount of investment. Relationships are complex and we often only see the tip of the iceberg in

public. For this reason, the most common phrase offered by the victim in defense of their unhealthy relationship is “You just don’t understand!”

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 complicates 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 a source of pressure, guilt, or aggression.



This newsletter has been issued by:
TraumaCare, Box 1807, Magaliesview, Gauteng, 2067
www.traumacare.co.za * mail@traumacare.co.za * Tel: 071 592 9690
Play Therapy * Counselling * Trauma Counselling
Please note that this information must not be used for diagnostic purposes. Please visit a medical professional for a correct diagnosis.