

BREAKING THE SILENCE

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During the last eight years of my medical education, I was taught over and over again to look for and recognize signs of intimate partner violence. As a resident physician in obstetrics and gynecology, I screened and counseled countless women affected by domestic abuse. I have a dedicated medical education, an undergraduate psychology degree, and a generally independent and self-reliant personality. Despite all of that, in the middle of my residency training I became ensnared in an abusive relationship, and it took me almost a year to leave.

It was slow and almost calculated work, that began with his complete devotion to me. He gave me a speedball dose of attention that I never even realized I wanted, but to which I was easily attracted. He was intelligent, hardworking, and gregarious. He included—or, in retrospect, ingrained—me in every aspect of his life. He showed up at the hospital with coffee when I was on call. He made a point to introduce me to his friends, and bring me to work functions. He told me he loved me early and often. He

said I was beautiful and smart, and he admired my passion for my work. As a fellow physician, he understood my daily triumphs and challenges, and provided comfort after stressful days. He planned out the life we would have together, complete with the house, three children, and two dogs. As the child of divorced parents, he offered me the nuclear family I had craved for years, wrapped in a comforting blanket of adoration. In hindsight, it was infatuation, but at the time it felt like love, and I thought I was lucky to have found it. I relaxed into the fold of the relationship, never doubting the love from this man who would seemingly do anything for me. This, of course, was the first step of the process: gaining my trust.

I do not know exactly how or when the dynamic began to change. Seemingly benign arguments escalated quickly, and developed a common theme: it was always my fault. I was inconsiderate. I hurt his feelings. I confided in my friends more than in him, and didn't make him feel important in my life. The guilt had a paradoxical effect, pulling me closer to him, and further from my support network.

He was quick to get angry when we argued. It was confusing, at first—why was this person, who supposedly adored me, so furious with me? Over something so small? My inevitable tears enraged him even further. He would shout and threaten to leave. I would cry harder, ask for forgiveness, and beg him to stay. I became dependent on him for my happiness and self-worth. I needed him. Perhaps it surprised even him to watch the independent woman he fell in love with collapse into an apologetic heap, weak and insecure. I just wanted so desperately for him to be happy, for us to be happy. He always followed the outbursts with remorse. He just had a quick temper, he said. If I learned to stop reacting like that, he would say, everything would change. If I could just be better, I thought, everything would be perfect.

Initially I was honest with close friends about our trials as a couple. It was toxic, they said. Not normal. Not healthy. They saw a gradual dismantling of my confidence and happiness, until I was only a shell of the friend they had known. But I was invested, and I loved him. So I did the easiest

thing. I stopped telling them. Step two of the process: isolation.

We functioned beautifully as a dysfunctional couple, and we excelled at maintaining appearances. I continued to be responsible for all of our difficulties. If he was unhappy, I accepted the blame. He became more controlling, dictating when we would go out, and with whom. He had opinions on every aspect of my life: I should exercise more. I should do fellowship at this program, not that one. Not even little things, such as my habit of listening to white noise to fall asleep, escaped his criticism.

The constant struggle for his approval chipped away at my sense of self, leaving me with a heart-crushing sense of loneliness. I could not bring myself to reach out to anyone, and became even more desperately attached to him. When he yelled at me, I cried so hard it caused petechiae around my eyes. I would curl up in a ball, and he would glare down at me with harsh, cold eyes. It was a frightening look that seemed filled with hate. He told me I was crazy. That no one would ever love me. And then, he would film me, sobbing on the floor. He recorded me crying, begging him to stay, and said, over and over again: "See how crazy you are? You think your friends don't know you're crazy? You think anyone could ever love this? Look at what you've become."

I should have seen it coming, should have known that physical abuse would follow the emotional abuse. At that point my blinders were fixed, and so instead it came as a shock. The first time, I was pointing at him while we argued. He reached out, grabbed my index finger, and bent it backwards. He held it there as I cried out in pain, and then slowly released his grip, that same cold look in his eyes. I pulled away, and stared at my hand. Would I be permanently injured? Would my surgical career be over? He showed up the next morning with ice and apologies. He promised it would never happen again, and I stayed. The shame that came

with staying was one of the final steps of my isolation.

There were always just enough positive interactions to convince me to stay. I deluded myself into thinking we were a couple that was working through our "issues." My tactics of strategically hiding information from most of my friends and family had worked, and I had avoided intervention. I could dismiss my own doubts with various excuses. I love him. He loves me. He apologized. The first time it occurred to me I was in an abusive situation, I was in our gynecologic oncology clinic. My patient had just quit smoking, and I congratulated her and asked her how she had done it. She said, "I just realized it was like an abusive relationship. It wasn't doing anything but hurting me. And I had to leave." I felt her words wash over me, and then they struck me as if I had been punched. She was telling my story. And yet, I stayed.

Why? I still torture myself with this question. Part of it was a sense of determination, of trying to hold on and make things work. It was as though the tenacity that had been a positive attribute in other facets of my life became displaced and destructive. I cannot deny that I wanted that fairytale picture he had initially painted. As a resident, with work being the overwhelming portion of my life, I craved balance. I thought that in order to be settled I would have to settle. And though I feared him, I also loved him.

The fights escalated, and became more physical. I went to our chief residents' graduation with a baseball-sized bruise on my knee that I carefully covered after being thrown to the ground. It was my fault, of course. We were arguing, and as I begged him not to leave, he picked me up and threw me onto the bed. He had purposely thrown me there because he did not want to hurt me, he said. It was my fault I fell off onto the hardwood floor. Only a week later, it escalated even further. Again we argued, and in a blur, I found myself pinned on my couch, his hands

around my neck. He smashed my cell phone, and stormed out of my apartment, leaving me with no way to call for help.

How had I gotten to this place, huddled on my floor in the middle of the night, scared, bruised, and alone? How was I going to take care of patients, having gotten so deep into a situation in which I had lost myself? My life was wrapped so intricately around him, that despite those events, initially I still ached to have him back in my life. I knew that what had happened was wrong, but I still mostly blamed myself. I was still weak enough to potentially let him back in my life. To prevent that, I finally broke my silence. I told my closest friends. I told my family. I even told my residency program director and another trusted faculty mentor. And I was fortunate to be showered with the support and resources I needed to close that door forever.

It is difficult to understand how I opened myself up to such a toxic situation. We collided in a way that clearly brought out the worst in both of us, once the initial infatuation had faded, but I was blind to it then. The self-blame has subsided, but the question still lingers: How did I miss my own diagnosis? Unfortunately, this pattern is not as uncommon as we would like to believe. It was a tremendously difficult and painful experience that I endured, but because of it I am stronger today than I have ever been. Reaching out to those around me and allowing them to help was the key to my recovery. By breaking my silence, I want to empower others to recognize what I could not see in myself. I hope to help patients, friends or colleagues who may find themselves in a similar cycle break free, seek help, and find their own strength and independence.

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