



## Why didn't I just walk away?

[First published on ellieornot and shared with permission](#)

I realised the whole “fight or flight” thing was untrue the day he grabbed me by the neck. It was then I realised there was a third possibility: to freeze, overwhelmed by shock and fear. There had been no warning sign or build up. Just a sudden, brutal shift which culminated in the person I trusted the most squeezing my neck until I fell to the ground, dizzy and struggling for breath. A profuse apology quickly followed. The anger in his eyes abated. Reassuring words replaced the venomous ones. “If you hadn't been so late today, I wouldn't have been so annoyed”, he said, subtly planting the seeds of self-blame.

Why didn't I just walk away? I convinced myself it was out of character; that the person I loved had made an awful mistake; that it wouldn't happen again; that I had done something to trigger it. I forgave and tried to forget. The seeds of self blame produced small but hardy shoots.

It happened again. And again. And again. The specific details of each episode are hazy but the triggers stand out: a broken glass, 10 minutes late for dinner, an interruption, questioning a decision. Small incidents which led to significant altercations. I lost count of the head injuries, the bruises and the clumps of hair torn out. I hid the broken ribs and dismissed the finger shaped bruises, attributing them to a clumsy fall. I lied to myself, to my friends, to my family, and to countless healthcare professionals. The hardy shoots transformed into suffocating vines of shame and self loathing.

Why didn't I just walk away? Because I deserved it. Because I caused it. Because I was stupid, fat and ugly. Because no one would believe me. Because I had nowhere to run to. Because running made the anger worse. Because I would not survive on my own. Because he would never allow me to leave. Because my friends would be embarrassed by me. Because work would find out and they wouldn't want a doctor who was incapable of looking after herself. Because the person I trusted the most told me these things and I, what was left of me, believed him. Because I couldn't believe or trust myself. Because I was no longer me.

Why didn't I just walk away? It's difficult to explain in a few paragraphs. Domestic violence isn't just a physical assault. It's a cruel and complex psychological assault. It robs you of your identity and self belief. It leaves you isolated, confused and fearful. Walking away is difficult and dangerous and, in the depths of an oppressive and hopeless situation, seems an impossible feat.

Why didn't I just walk away? I did eventually. There was no epiphany or dramatic final straw. One day I just left. I can't explain how or why. One day I just found the strength to walk away.

I expected to walk straight back to my old life and, as a result, I failed to appreciate the extent of the damage caused. Instead of addressing the trauma, I pushed it to the back of my mind. In this vulnerable state, I made the mistake of following a path to a second destructive relationship. There was no physical violence however, in some ways, the experience was just as toxic. As



before, it was about control. It started with subtle criticism and escalated to more hurtful, undermining behaviour. It was insidious and therefore difficult to define. My beliefs were dismissed as silly and my responses as over reactions. My friends and family recognised it long before I did. I didn't challenge it. I had been conditioned to expect no better.

Both of these men are, thankfully, gone from my life. Things has moved on and I'm grateful I've been able to rebuild. Despite the positives, the negative impact of what happened still persists. The roots remain. Nightmares still wake me. I sleep with the light on because monsters lurk in the dark. I run, emotionally and physically, from difficult situations. I still struggle with any form of conflict; raised voices and disagreements stir feelings of panic. It's a work in progress and it's one I'm thankful to have help with.

Victims of domestic violence aren't stupid and they aren't weak. Just as there is no "typical" abuser, there is no archetypal abused person. Despite what you may believe, everyone is susceptible; your daughter, your friend, your mother, your sister.

Walking away is the first step in a long and difficult journey. No matter how awful the situation may seem, no matter how suffocating and inescapable, there is help available. We all have a role to play. We can talk about domestic violence. We can join the conversation and challenge the stigma. We can avoid victim blaming. We can pledge to stop asking "why didn't she just walk away" and start asking "what can I do to understand this? What can I do to help?". We owe it to every woman who has lost her life and to every woman still trapped. By offering support and understanding, we can help the wounds heal and the scars fade.

Thank you for reading.

<http://www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk/>

<http://www.refuge.org.uk/>

<http://www.womensaid.org.uk/>

<http://www.dvmen.co.uk/>

<http://www.brokenrainbow.org.uk/>

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