

INTIMACY, SEX & RELATIONSHIP

There's No Changing An Abuser, So Kick Him Out



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At a corner table with her vanilla-soy latte, Terry, 40, an attractive pharmaceutical rep, nurses her creamy concoction. Watching as the plastic stirrer makes lazy concentric circles inside the foam, she almost forgets her bruised left eye and her humiliation.

How could Jack have hit her? Tears streak down her cheeks as the stinging returns.

When she first met Jack — 38, successful, smart and funny — she thought she had found the man of her dreams. They had a special chemistry that made her “tickle” inside when he touched her. He was an attentive listener and she found herself sharing things about her past she hadn’t told anyone else.

Everyone seemed to like Jack, everyone except his ex-wife, Jenna, who tried to warn Terry that he was a liar and an abuser. “Be careful,” she once said. “He’ll charm you with his pretty words and gifts, but he has a violent temper!” Terry couldn’t believe Jenna’s stories about Jack slapping her or trashing her things. “She just wants him back,” she thought.

Jack and Terry dated for eight blissful months. After they moved in together, things shifted. It was like she was living with Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. He would go from sweet to raging with the slightest provocation. His moodiness had become intolerable. But Terry also noticed when Jack broke things that he never broke his own things. He also treated her better around their friends. Surely, he has some control over this behavior. And he sounded like a hurt little puppy when he apologized so convincingly and told her how much he loves her. And when the sex was good, it was ecstatic.

“He only needs more love and reassurance,” she thought after one of his blow-ups. “He’s just insecure.” Jack would tell her one hard-luck story after another, and she felt sorry for him. He told her he was neglected as a child, rejected by other women and just needed to learn better ways to handle his anger. Terry was sure she could change him by giving him the love he needed. But she was wrong.

Last night, while driving home from a friend’s birthday party, Jack accused her of not showing him enough attention and flirting with his best friend, Tom. When she disagreed, he hauled off and hit her in the face. She never saw it coming. She screamed and kicked at the door. He screeched to the curb and pushed her onto the sidewalk. She walked home, nearly four miles in the dark.

Men physically abuse more than 2 million women each year in the United States. Millions more are emotionally abused, verbally humiliated and economically oppressed. Although there are also men who are victimized by women, these numbers are much lower.

Excuses for abuse run rampant, but there is no excuse. It is not alcohol that makes a person abuse, or low self-esteem or fear of abandonment. Many people have these concerns and don’t resort to violence. The more you try to figure out your partner’s behavior or take responsibility for his abuse, the more deeply enmeshed you’ll become.

Many abused women pour tons of energy into repairing the situation, hoping to fill their partner’s emotional void and ward off the next abusive episode. Unfortunately, catering to an abuser only reinforces his explosiveness.

You can’t change an abuser. Only they can change when they’re good and ready. You know they’re changing when they stop making excuses for mistreating you, listen to what you’re saying without interrupting, decrease their controlling behavior and show you consistent respect.

So what should Terry do after her eye heals and Jack starts calling her with apologies, begging for another chance and promising to change?

Did I hear you say, “Tell him to hit the road, Jack?” I couldn’t agree more.

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