Emotional Abuse and Threats of Abandonment

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I don’t hear much about this type of abuse. **Threats of abandonment are a form of emotional manipulation that uses a person’s fear as a weapon.**

I know a woman who shared the following story with me. She was trying to explain the problems she experienced in her marriage with her husband at the time.  I will use her words to tell you her experience:

“One night my husband and I were arguing about something, I’m not sure what.  He began mocking me by supposedly imitating me, using insulting gestures, insinuating that I was crazy.  Then he promptly called me a Fu%$ing Bi\*&!, turned over and fell asleep.”

“The next morning he wanted sex before he went out for the day. Of course, I was still shocked and hurt from the previous night’s argument and said, ‘No.’  He thought I was being completely unfair so he kept trying to talk me into it; but, I wouldn’t budge, which made him angry.  Finally, he took off his wedding ring, threw it at me, and told me I was irrelevant to him and was no longer a wife.”

“I was further shocked and traumatized by this action, and had no idea how to respond, so I just looked at him and stated, ‘I can’t believe you’re doing this to me.’ He promptly left.”

Now, did this woman’s husband do anything illegal?  Was any of this considered domestic violence in the eyes of the law? The answer to both questions is, “No.” What this woman experienced was verbal abuse and sexual abuse by threat of abandonment. She knew that if she would have given in to her husband’s request she wouldn’t have experienced this abandonment; but, she also knew that in order to hold on to her own dignity, she could not have sex with a man who was being hurtful to her, even if it was her spouse.

Time went on for this woman and she eventually forgave her husband for the mean behavior he had demonstrated. She ultimately moved on with her relationship and gave up expecting any accountability or apologies from him. After a while she ended up wanting sex herself and was willing to forget about the incident entirely, even though her husband did not put his wedding ring back on.

Emotional abuse happens in a cycle just as physical abuse does. **Emotional abusers are really the same as physical abusers, except that emotional abusers tend to use more “acceptable” means of controlling their partners;** not that what her husband did was acceptable by any means, it still did not draw blood or break any bones.

**Emotional abusers tend to use their targets’ weaknesses as weapons.** In general, most people do not experience abandonment well, but for the woman depicted in the story above, abandonment was a particularly effective means of control, for she already had “abandonment issues.”  Her abuser was well aware that if he threatened to abandon her he would most likely be able to get his way with her.

However, this woman was learning to set boundaries and hold on to her dignity, even if her abuser threatened to leave.  As with any abuser, when the victim starts setting boundaries and saying, “No,” the abuser will “up the ante,” and do even more damaging behaviors. **Abusers seldom respect or respond well to boundaries.**

When the abuser in our story realized that his verbal abuse and abandonment strategies were failing to control his wife, the next time he demanded sex and she did not comply he felt outraged, indignant, and entitled. In addition to these negative emotions, his delusional thinking kicked in and convinced him that his spouse truly was not a wife and he was free to meet his sexual needs by pursuing sexual relationships outside of their marriage.

**Abandonment as an abuse technique is very effective because people are wired for connection.** When the threat of abandonment is real, the body releases certain neurotransmitters and hormones, such as cortisol and adrenaline. In addition to this, with a lack of connection, the hormone oxytocin – a “feel good” bonding chemical is depleted. This brain chemical reaction causes the victim to feel terrible. She will do anything to bring back the “good” feelings. This is true regardless of the mode of abuse a victim is subjected to.

**As the victim learns to experience abandonment whenever she doesn’t comply with her abuser’s demands, she starts being conditioned, like a trained dog, to do whatever it takes to prevent the abandonment (and the chemicals that wash her brain) from occurring, by doing whatever her abuser wants.**

In fact, **both the victim and the abuser become conditioned to this response**. The abuser, in turn, feels further emboldened in his power over the victim because his tactics bring the results he is after. Unfortunately, however, an abuser is deeply disturbed within his own psyche, and the short-term benefits of getting cooperation from his victim do nothing to heal his true angst.

Over time, as both parties practice over and over again patterns of abusive interactions, the times in between abusive episodes decreases. This happens, because, as mentioned above, **the problem within the abuser has nothing to do with his partner at all**. Her acquiescence to his demands does not fix his true ailment – a deeply ingrained sense of ennui and shame.

The victim in this scenario eventually becomes “shell shocked” by the constant threats of abandonment and the continual sacrificing of her own wants and needs. Over time, the victim of this type (and other types) of abuse eventually loses herself.

Note:  If you are a male victim of abuse, please realize that abuse is not a respecter of genders. Pronouns in this article were used because of case study involved.

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