

Leave, Or Else: Giving Ultimatums to Abuse Victims

By Lee Cicuta

Abuse is ubiquitous in our society, and as a result there are very few among us, if any, who have not been abused themselves or in proximity to someone else being abused. Myths about why and how abuse occurs run rampant and the ones that dominate are ones that ultimately serve in the maintenance of the status quo that keeps victims disempowered and silent. As a result, even those few who do actually believe victims of abuse and see the danger such abuse poses to them still often respond to the conditions the victim is entrapped within in ways that ultimately affirm the abuser's narrative and further alienate/isolate the survivor. One of the most common of these responses, and the subject of this essay, is delivering an ultimatum.

Your dear friend has been in a dangerously abusive relationship for three years. She's broken up with him several times, but for some reason you cannot fathom she keeps taking him back. In the time they've been together she has changed in ways you see hurt her, she doesn't go out with you (or anyone) much anymore because he is extremely jealous and insecure, and her boyfriend has shown up in a rage a handful of other times when she has gone out. You hate seeing her like this, are scared for her, and desperately want her to escape the relationship for good. You come to a decision, you can stand by no longer, and you deliver an ultimatum to your friend: either she breaks up with her abuser, or you can't spend time together anymore. You hope that this will be the harsh awakening she obviously needs to do what is best for her. Surely she will choose to maintain a valued friendship over such an obviously abusive relationship, right? When she doesn't—when she reacts to this angrily or defensively instead, and “chooses” to stay in the relationship—you can comfortably wash your hands of the whole ordeal.

It is understandable to see someone you care about in danger and want to intervene, to feel desperate to get them away from the danger as soon as possible and by any means at your disposal. It is also reasonable to need to examine or change your own boundaries in relation to the situation to establish a baseline of safety for yourself. However, delivering ultimatums like the example above or otherwise trying to forcibly remove the victim from the situation can not only cause more harm and further endanger the victim, but also validates the logic of the abuser: that the victim does not, and cannot, know what is best for them and therefore must have their agency overridden by another.

Firstly, on the efficacy of such an ultimatum: as I explore in more depth in another essay, [*“Why Don't They Just Leave?”: Entrapment as the Context of Abuse*](#), being unable to leave an abusive person is a *symptom* of being abused, not its cause. Abusers restrict, co-opt, and destroy their victim's autonomy. They use both their intimate knowledge of their victim and surrounding material and social conditions to entrap them so they cannot escape. It takes survivors an average of [7 attempts](#) to leave an abuser and the act of leaving is, in fact, the most deadly for people with abusive partner. [Approximately 75%](#) of women who are murdered by their abusive partners are killed when trying to exit the relationship or shortly after having done so.

In the mind of the observer (who has only seen but a small fraction of the total abusive context, no matter how much has been disclosed to them) there seems to be a clear dichotomy between safety and danger that is determined by the presence, or lack thereof, of an official, mutually agreed upon relationship. It is a contract that is not suiting both parties, therefore the aggrieved party should end the contact. Simple solution. The victim, however, is well aware that the nature of the relationship is not a mutual contract but a hostage taking situation. One that requires caution, subterfuge, and a very keen awareness that the hostage taker will discharge whatever weapons they have at their disposal to maintain control. Navigating safety in this dynamic means knowing that making an obvious sprint towards the exit can end your life and even the lives of those who try to help you. Sometimes staying and going along with what the hostage taker says is the only option you have to stay alive.

Responding to someone entrapped in this situation—in a context where their agency is being suppressed and their dignity denied to them—with a controlling ultimatum of your own is like trying to resolve a hostage situation by calling up the hostages and telling them if they don't get to running soon you'll come by and take their shoes. Beyond demonstrating a dangerous misunderstanding of the power dynamic that determines the situation (the hostage taker leveling a loaded gun at their victim's head, disinclining anyone from taking actions in open view that could potentially displease them), you are threatening to remove one of the few resources that *could* actually help them escape when the time was right: social support.

External social and material support are the most important things for abuse victims to have, as leaving or challenging an abuser requires extensive planning, resources, and caution. Abusers go to great lengths to cut survivors off from these supports. Note in our beginning example, the abuser knows that his victim's connections are sources of external strength that could undermine his authority over her, so he poured extensive energy into making maintaining friendships incredibly difficult for the victim: to the extent that his behavior has caused enough tension and stress in the victim's friends that they are starting to end their associations with her voluntarily. If she does stay in their lives, she will be far more hesitant to mention the abuse again and more likely to hide the evidence of it. She may even work hard to rehabilitate her abuser's image to them. If they do cut her out, she is even more effectively isolated from the people who could help her or challenge his narrative.

Abusers and their chosen narratives are numerous, but the essentials remain more or less consistent: the abuser knows what is best, the victim needs to submit to the abuser's better judgment; the victim is naive/stupid/incompetent and needs someone else to force them into doing what is better/smarter/more appropriate; there is something about the victim that is weak or otherwise "invites" abuse; the victim would be better off just doing what the abuser tells them to without question. While enduring the abuse the victim is frequently pushed to doubt their own sense of reality, to bypass their own desires and feelings to be servant to someone else's, and to internalize that they are bad or otherwise deserving of abuse. Intentionally or not, delivering ultimatums to abuse victims shares much more in common with the core message of the abuser than they challenge it. They communicate, as the abuser communicates, "You don't know what's best for you, only I do, and I have to force it on you for your own good."

No matter how many glimpses behind the curtain you've managed, no matter how many disclosures the victim has made to you, it is vitally important to understand that no one has a fuller picture of the abuser nor a better awareness of the risk they pose than their victim. "Just leave" besides being generally unhelpful and callous advice, can be deadly to those who follow it without a plan. Sometimes the risk is not just to the victim themselves, but to pets, family, friends, children whom the abuser has threatened to keep the victim in line. It might be impossible for other reasons, an incredibly common one being a victim's economic dependence on their abuser. There are more bars on the cage than the few you see from your perspective. Joining the abuser in denying the victim's ability to analyze their situation and respond to it reasonably ultimately casts you as another antagonist to their agency. It is not, and can never be, a loving or supportive action to find ways to manipulate or override a victim's autonomy.

It is impossible to quantify how hard it is to see people we care about being entrapped and abused by others. It is beyond reasonable to wish to intervene and put a stop to it. However, it is clear that many people's misconceptions about the very nature of abuse lead them to attempt to intervene in ways that reaffirm the disempowerment of abuse victims and the narratives of abusers. Further, these misconceptions serve to help many feel distanced from the possibility of victimization, to Other victims of violence. It is easier to focus on the supposed failures and shortcomings of victims than to assess the ways abusive people can mobilize our existing material and social systems to entrap their victims so successfully that they *cannot* escape. It is less labor to place the onus on victims to "just leave" than to reckon with the moral imperative in front of us to make leaving actually possible. It makes us feel like we have a little more control over our own safety to think of victims as people who just haven't made all the brilliant decisions we would have if we were them.

Do not be yet another person trying to impose your will on an abuse victim. It is not supportive, it does not counter the abuser's narrative, and doing so will make many victims less likely to trust you or disclose information about the abuse to you. Abuse victims need friends who will remind them of what it feels like to be treated with compassion, respect, and dignity. They need people who will foster space for them to process the abuse without feeling judged or victim-blamed. They need a support network that offers them actual resources rather than admonishments (food, a place to stay, people to call in an emergency, money, etc.) and that doesn't make access to those resources contingent on their relationship status or on promises to never return to it.

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