

Home » Quizzes » Stockholm Syndrome »

Love and Stockholm Syndrome: The Mystery of Loving an Abuser (Part 1)

By Dr Joseph M Carver, PhD

If you're in a controlling and abusive relationship, you may recognize several of the characteristics described in this article by Consulting Clinical Psychologist Dr Joseph M. Carver, PhD. Part 1 describes the formation of bonds between victim and abuser, while Part 2 continues with observations about cognitive dissonance and offers suggestions for friends and family of victims.

Also available in
Spanish: *El Amor y el Síndrome de Estocolmo: El Misterio de Amar a un Abusador*

Introduction

People are often amazed at their own psychological conditions and reactions. Those with depression are stunned when they remember they've thought of killing themselves. Patients recovering from severe psychiatric disturbances are often shocked as they remember their symptoms and behavior during the episode. A patient with Bipolar Disorder recently told me "I can't believe I thought I could change the weather through mental telepathy!" A common reaction is "I can't believe I did that!"

In clinical practice, some of the most surprised and shocked individuals are those who have been involved in controlling and abusive relationships. When the relationship ends, they offer comments such as "I know what he's done to me, but I still love him", "I don't know why, but I want him back", or "I know it sounds crazy, but I miss her". Recently I've heard "This doesn't make sense. He's got a new girlfriend and he's abusing her too...but I'm jealous!" Friends and relatives are even more amazed and shocked when they hear these comments or witness their loved one returning to an abusive relationship. While the situation doesn't make sense from a social standpoint, does it make sense from a psychological viewpoint? The answer is — Yes!

On August 23rd, 1973 two machine-gun carrying criminals entered a bank in Stockholm, Sweden. Blasting their guns, one prison escapee named Jan-Erik Olsson announced to the terrified bank employees "The party has just begun!" The two bank robbers held four hostages, three women and one man, for the next 131 hours. The hostages were strapped with dynamite and held in a bank vault until finally rescued on August 28th.

After their rescue, the hostages exhibited a shocking attitude considering they were threatened, abused, and feared for their lives for over five days. In their media interviews, it was clear that they supported their captors and actually feared law enforcement personnel who came to their rescue. The hostages had begun to feel the captors were actually protecting them from the police. One woman later became engaged to one of the criminals and another developed a legal defense fund to aid in their criminal defense fees. Clearly, the hostages had "bonded" emotionally with their captors.

While the psychological condition in hostage situations became known as "Stockholm Syndrome" due to the publicity, the emotional "bonding" with captors was a familiar story in psychology. It had been recognized many years before and was found in studies of other hostage, prisoner, or abusive situations such as:

- Abused Children
- Battered/Abused Women
- Prisoners of War
- Cult Members

- Incest Victims
- Criminal Hostage Situations
- Concentration Camp Prisoners
- Controlling/Intimidating Relationships

In the final analysis, emotionally bonding with an abuser is actually a strategy for survival for victims of abuse and intimidation. The “Stockholm Syndrome” reaction in hostage and/or abuse situations is so well recognized at this time that police hostage negotiators no longer view it as unusual. In fact, it is often encouraged in crime situations as it improves the chances for survival of the hostages. On the down side, it also assures that the hostages experiencing “Stockholm Syndrome” will not be very cooperative during rescue or criminal prosecution. Local law enforcement personnel have long recognized this syndrome with battered women who fail to press charges, bail their battering husband/boyfriend out of jail, and even physically attack police officers when they arrive to rescue them from a violent assault.

Stockholm Syndrome (SS) can also be found in family, romantic, and interpersonal relationships. The abuser may be a husband or wife, boyfriend or girlfriend, father or mother, or any other role in which the abuser is in a position of control or authority.

It’s important to understand the components of Stockholm Syndrome as they relate to abusive and controlling relationships. Once the syndrome is understood, it’s easier to understand why victims support, love, and even defend their abusers and controllers.

Every syndrome has symptoms or behaviors, and Stockholm Syndrome is no exception. While a clear-cut list has not been established due to varying opinions by researchers and experts, several of these features will be present:

- Positive feelings by the victim toward the abuser/controller
- Negative feelings by the victim toward family, friends, or authorities trying to rescue/support them or win their release
- Support of the abuser’s reasons and behaviors
- Positive feelings by the abuser toward the victim
- Supportive behaviors by the victim, at times helping the abuser
- Inability to engage in behaviors that may assist in their release or detachment

Stockholm Syndrome doesn’t occur in every hostage or abusive situation. In another bank robbery involving hostages, after terrorizing patrons and employees for many hours, a police sharpshooter shot and wounded the terrorizing bank robber. After he hit the floor, two women picked him up and physically held him up to the window for another shot. As you can see, the length of time one is exposed to abuse/control and other factors are certainly involved.

It has been found that four situations or conditions are present that serve as a foundation for the development of Stockholm Syndrome. These four situations can be found in hostage, severe abuse, and abusive relationships:

- The presence of a perceived threat to one’s physical or psychological survival and the belief that the abuser would carry out the threat.
- The presence of a perceived small kindness from the abuser to the victim
- Isolation from perspectives other than those of the abuser
- The perceived inability to escape the situation

By considering each situation we can understand how Stockholm Syndrome develops in romantic relationships as well as criminal/hostage situations. Looking at each situation:

Perceived Threat to One’s Physical/Psychological Survival

The perception of threat can be formed by direct, indirect, or witnessed methods. Criminal or antisocial partners can directly threaten your life or the life of friends and family. Their history of violence leads us to believe that the captor/controller will carry out the threat in a direct manner if we fail to comply with their demands. The abuser assures us that only our cooperation keeps our loved ones safe.

Indirectly, the abuser/controller offers subtle threats that you will never leave them or have another partner, reminding you that people in the past have paid dearly for not following their wishes. Hints are often offered such as “I know people who can make others disappear”. Indirect threats also come from the stories told by the abuser or controller — how they obtained revenge on those who have crossed them in the past. These stories of revenge are told to remind the victim that revenge is possible if they leave.

Witnessing violence or aggression is also a perceived threat. Witnessing a violent temper directed at a television set, others on the highway, or a third party clearly sends us the message that we could be the next target for violence. Witnessing the thoughts and attitudes of the abuser/controller is threatening and intimidating, knowing that we will be the target of those thoughts in the future.

The “Small Kindness” Perception

In threatening and survival situations, we look for evidence of hope — a small sign that the situation may improve. When an abuser/controller shows the victim some small kindness, even though it is to the abuser’s benefit as well, the victim interprets that small kindness as a positive trait of the captor. In criminal/war hostage situations, letting the victim live is often enough. Small behaviors, such as allowing a bathroom visit or providing food/water, are enough to strengthen the Stockholm Syndrome in criminal hostage events.

In relationships with abusers, a birthday card, a gift (usually provided after a period of abuse), or a special treat are interpreted as not only positive, but evidence that the abuser is not “all bad” and may at some time correct his/her behavior. Abusers and controllers are often given positive credit for not abusing their partner, when the partner would have normally been subjected to verbal or physical abuse in a certain situation. An aggressive and jealous partner may normally become intimidating or abusive in certain social situations, as when an opposite-sex coworker waves in a crowd. After seeing the wave, the victim expects to be verbally battered and when it doesn’t happen, that “small kindness” is interpreted as a positive sign.

Similar to the small kindness perception is the perception of a “soft side”. During the relationship, the abuser/controller may share information about their past — how they were mistreated, abused, neglected, or wronged. The victim begins to feel the abuser/controller may be capable of fixing their behavior or worse yet, that they (abuser) may also be a “victim”. Sympathy may develop toward the abuser and we often hear the victim of Stockholm Syndrome defending their abuser with “I know he fractured my jaw and ribs...but he’s troubled. He had a rough childhood!” Losers and abusers may admit they need psychiatric help or acknowledge they are mentally disturbed; however, it’s almost always after they have already abused or intimidated the victim. The admission is a way of denying responsibility for the abuse. In truth, personality disorders and criminals have learned over the years that personal responsibility for their violent/abusive behaviors can be minimized and even denied by blaming their bad upbringing, abuse as a child, and now even video games. One murderer blamed his crime on eating too much junk food — now known as the “Twinkie Defense”. While it may be true that the abuser/controller had a difficult upbringing, showing sympathy for his/her history produces no change in their behavior and in fact, prolongs the length of time you will be abused. While “sad stories” are always included in their apologies — after the abusive/controlling event — their behavior never changes! Keep in mind: once you become hardened to the “sad stories”, they will simply try another approach. I know of no victim of abuse or crime who has heard their abuser say "I'm beating (robbing, mugging, etc.) you because my Mom hated me!"

Isolation from Perspectives Other than those of the Captor

In abusive and controlling relationships, the victim has the sense they are always “walking on eggshells” — fearful of saying or doing anything that might prompt a violent/intimidating outburst. For their survival, they begin to see the world through the abuser’s perspective. They begin to fix things that might prompt an outburst, act in ways they know makes the abuser happy, or avoid aspects of their own life that may prompt a problem. If we only have a dollar in our pocket, then most of our decisions become financial decisions. If our partner is an abuser or controller, then the majority of our decisions are based on our perception of the abuser’s potential reaction. We become preoccupied with the needs, desires, and habits of the abuser/controller.

Taking the abuser's perspective as a survival technique can become so intense that the victim actually develops anger toward those trying to help them. The abuser is already angry and resentful toward anyone who would provide the victim support, typically using multiple methods and manipulations to isolate the victim from others. Any contact the victim has with supportive people in the community is met with accusations, threats, and/or violent outbursts. Victims then turn on their family — fearing family contact will cause additional violence and abuse in the home. At this point, victims curse their parents and friends, tell them not to call and to stop interfering, and break off communication with others. Agreeing with the abuser/controller, supportive others are now viewed as “causing trouble” and must be avoided. Many victims threaten their family and friends with restraining orders if they continue to “interfere” or try to help the victim in their situation. On the surface it would appear that they have sided with the abuser/controller. In truth, they are trying to minimize contact with situations that might make them a target of additional verbal abuse or intimidation. If a casual phone call from Mom prompts a two-hour temper outburst with threats and accusations — the victim quickly realizes it's safer if Mom stops calling. If simply telling Mom to stop calling doesn't work, for his or her own safety the victim may accuse Mom of attempting to ruin the relationship and demand that she stop calling.

In severe cases of Stockholm Syndrome in relationships, the victim may have difficulty leaving the abuser and may actually feel the abusive situation is their fault. In law enforcement situations, the victim may actually feel the arrest of their partner for physical abuse or battering is their fault. Some women will allow their children to be removed by child protective agencies rather than give up the relationship with their abuser. As they take the perspective of the abuser, the children are at fault — they complained about the situation, they brought the attention of authorities to the home, and they put the adult relationship at risk. Sadly, the children have now become a danger to the victim's safety. For those with Stockholm Syndrome, allowing the children to be removed from the home decreases their victim stress while providing an emotionally and physically safer environment for the children.

Perceived Inability to Escape

As a hostage in a bank robbery, threatened by criminals with guns, it's easy to understand the perceived inability to escape. In romantic relationships, the belief that one can't escape is also very common. Many abusive/controlling relationships feel like till-death-do-us-part relationships — locked together by mutual financial issues/assets, mutual intimate knowledge, or legal situations. Here are some common situations:

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Controlling partners have increased the financial obligations/debt in the relationship to the point that neither partner can financially survive on their own. Controllers who sense their partner may be leaving will often purchase a new automobile, later claiming they can't pay alimony or child support due to their large car payments.

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The legal ending of a relationship, especially a marital relationship, often creates significant problems. A Controller who has an income that is “under the table” or maintained through legally questionable situations runs the risk of those sources of income being investigated or made public by the divorce/separation. The Controller then becomes more agitated about the possible public exposure of their business arrangements than the loss of the relationship.

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The Controller often uses extreme threats including threatening to take the children out of state, threatening to quit their job/business rather than pay alimony/support, threatening public exposure of the victim's personal issues, or assuring the victim they will never have a peaceful life due to nonstop harassment. In severe cases, the Controller may threaten an action that will undercut the victim's support such as “I'll see that you lose your job” or “I'll have your automobile burned”.

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Controllers often keep the victim locked into the relationship with severe guilt — threatening suicide if the victim leaves. The victim hears “I’ll kill myself in front of the children”, “I’ll set myself on fire in the front yard”, or “Our children won’t have a father/mother if you leave me!”

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In relationships with an abuser or controller, the victim has also experienced a loss of self-esteem, self-confidence, and psychological energy. The victim may feel “burned out” and too depressed to leave. Additionally, abusers and controllers often create a type of dependency by controlling the finances, placing automobiles/homes in their name, and eliminating any assets or resources the victim may use to leave. In clinical practice I’ve heard “I’d leave but I can’t even get money out of the savings account! I don’t know the PIN number.”

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In teens and young adults, victims may be attracted to a controlling individual when they feel inexperienced, insecure, and overwhelmed by a change in their life situation. When parents are going through a divorce, a teen may attach to a controlling individual, feeling the controller may stabilize their life. Freshmen in college may be attracted to controlling individuals who promise to help them survive living away from home on a college campus.

In unhealthy relationships and definitely in Stockholm Syndrome there is a daily preoccupation with “trouble”. Trouble is any individual, group, situation, comment, casual glance, or cold meal that may produce a temper tantrum or verbal abuse from the controller or abuser. To survive, “trouble” is to be avoided at all costs. The victim must control situations that produce trouble. That may include avoiding family, friends, co-workers, and anyone who may create “trouble” in the abusive relationship. The victim does not hate family and friends; they are only avoiding “trouble”! The victim also cleans the house, calms the children, scans the mail, avoids certain topics, and anticipates every issue of the controller or abuse in an effort to avoid “trouble”. In this situation, children who are noisy become “trouble”. Loved ones and friends are sources of “trouble” for the victim who is attempting to avoid verbal or physical aggression.

Stockholm Syndrome in relationships is not uncommon. Law enforcement professionals are painfully aware of the situation — making a domestic dispute one of the high-risk calls during work hours. Called by neighbors during a spousal abuse incident, the abuser is passive upon arrival of the police, only to find the abused spouse upset and threatening the officers if their abusive partner is arrested for domestic violence. In truth, the victim knows the abuser/controller will retaliate against him/her if 1) they encourage an arrest, 2) they offer statements about the abuse/fight that are deemed disloyal by the abuser, 3) they don’t bail them out of jail as quickly as possible, and 4) they don’t personally apologize for the situation — as though it was their fault.

Stockholm Syndrome produces an unhealthy bond with the controller and abuser. It is the reason many victims continue to support an abuser after the relationship is over. It’s also the reason they continue to see “the good side” of an abusive individual and appear sympathetic to someone who has mentally and sometimes physically abused them.

Continue to Part 2...

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