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Love and Stockholm Syndrome: The Mystery of Loving an Abuser (Part 2)

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 2 offers observations about cognitive dissonance and suggestions for friends and family of victims, while Part 1 describes the formation of bonds between victim and abuser.

Also available in

Spanish: *El*

Amor y el

Síndrome de

Estocolmo: El

Misterio de

Amar a un

Abusador.

Is There Something Else Involved?

In a short response — Yes! Throughout history, people have found themselves supporting and participating in life situations that range from abusive to bizarre. In talking to these active and willing participants in bad and bizarre situations, it is clear they have developed feelings and attitudes that support their participation. One way these feelings and thoughts are developed is known as “cognitive dissonance”. As you can tell, psychologists have large words and phrases for just about everything.

“Cognitive Dissonance” explains how and why people change their ideas and opinions to support situations that do not appear to be healthy, positive, or normal. In the theory, an individual seeks to reduce information or opinions that make him or her uncomfortable. When we have two sets of cognitions (knowledge, opinion, feelings, input from others, etc.) that are the opposite, the situation becomes emotionally uncomfortable. Even though we might find ourselves in a foolish or difficult situation — few want to admit that fact. Instead, we attempt to reduce the dissonance — the fact that our cognitions don't match, agree, or make sense when combined. “Cognitive Dissonance” can be reduced by adding new cognitions — adding new thoughts and attitudes. Some examples:

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Heavy smokers know smoking causes lung cancer and multiple health risks. To continue smoking, the smoker changes his cognitions (thoughts/feelings) such as 1) “I'm smoking less than ten years ago”, 2) “I'm smoking low-tar cigarettes”, 3) “Those statistics are made up by the cancer industry conspiracy”, or 4) “Something's got to get you anyway!” These new cognitions/attitudes allow them to keep smoking and actually begin blaming restaurants for being unfair.

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You purchase a \$40,000.00 Sport Utility Vehicle that gets 8 miles a gallon. You justify the expense and related issues with 1) “It's great on trips” (you take one trip per year), 2) “I can use it to haul stuff” (one coffee table in 12 months), and 3) “You can carry a lot of people in it” (95% of your trips are driver-only).

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Your husband/boyfriend becomes abusive and assaultive. You can't leave due to the finances, children, or other factors. Through cognitive dissonance, you begin telling yourself “He only hits me open-handed” and “He's had a lot of stress at work.”

Leon Festinger first coined the term “Cognitive Dissonance”. He had observed a cult (1956) in which members gave up their homes, incomes, and jobs to work for the cult. This cult believed in messages from outer space that predicted the day the world would end by a flood. As cult members and firm believers, they believed they would be saved by flying saucers at the appointed time. As they gathered and waited to be taken by flying saucers at the specified time, the end-of-the-world came and went. No flood and no flying saucer! Rather than believing they were foolish after all that personal and emotional investment — they decided their beliefs had actually saved the world from the flood and they became firmer in their beliefs after the failure of the prophecy. The moral: the more you invest (income, job, home, time, effort, etc.) the stronger your need to justify your position. If we invest \$5.00 in a raffle ticket, we justify losing with “I’ll get them next time”. If you invest everything you have, it requires an almost unreasoning belief and unusual attitude to support and justify that investment.

Studies tell us we are more loyal and committed to something that is difficult, uncomfortable, and even humiliating. The initiation rituals of college fraternities, Marine boot camp, and graduate school all produce loyal and committed individuals. Almost any ordeal creates a bonding experience. Every couple, no matter how mismatched, falls in love in the movies after going through a terrorist takeover, being stalked by a killer, being stranded on an island, or being involved in an alien abduction. Investment and an ordeal are ingredients for a strong bonding — even if the bonding is unhealthy. No one bonds or falls in love by being a member of the Automobile Club or a music CD club. Struggling to survive on a deserted island — you bet!

Abusive relationships produce a great amount on unhealthy investment in both parties. In many cases we tend to remain and support the abusive relationship due to our investment in the relationship. Try telling a new Marine that since he or she has survived boot camp, they should now enroll in the National Guard! Several types of investments keep us in the bad relationship:

Emotional Investment

We’ve invested so many emotions, cried so much, and worried so much that we feel we must see the relationship through to the finish.

Social Investment

We’ve got our pride! To avoid social embarrassment and uncomfortable social situations, we remain in the relationship.

Family Investments

If children are present in the relationship, decisions regarding the relationship are clouded by the status and needs of the children.

Financial Investment

In many cases, the controlling and abusive partner has created a complex financial situation. Many victims remain in a bad relationship, waiting for a better financial situation to develop that would make their departure and detachment easier.

Lifestyle Investment

Many controlling/abusive partners use money or a lifestyle as an investment. Victims in this situation may not want to lose their current lifestyle.

Intimacy Investment

We often invest emotional and sexual intimacy. Some victims have experienced a destruction of their emotional and/or sexual self-esteem in the unhealthy relationship. The abusing partner may threaten to spread rumors or tell intimate details or secrets. A type of blackmail using intimacy is often found in these situations.

In many cases, it’s not simply our feelings for an individual that keep us in an unhealthy relationship — it’s often the amount of investment. Relationships are complex and we often only see the tip of the iceberg in public. For this reason, the most common phrase offered by the victim in defense of their unhealthy relationship is “You just don’t understand!”

Combining Two Unhealthy Conditions

The combination of “Stockholm Syndrome” and “cognitive dissonance” produces a victim who firmly believes the relationship is not only acceptable, but also desperately needed for their survival. The victim feels they would mentally collapse if the relationship ended. In long-term relationships, the victims have invested everything and placed “all their eggs in one basket”. The relationship now decides their level of self-esteem, self-worth, and emotional health.

For reasons described above, the victim feels family and friends are a threat to the relationship and eventually to their personal health and existence. The more family/friends protest the controlling and abusive nature of the relationship, the more the victim develops cognitive dissonance and becomes defensive. At this point, family and friends become victims of the abusive and controlling individual.

Importantly, both Stockholm Syndrome and cognitive dissonance develop on an involuntary basis. The victim does not purposely invent this attitude. Both develop as an attempt to exist and survive in a threatening and controlling environment and relationship. Despite what we might think, our loved one is not in the unhealthy relationship to irritate us, embarrass us, or drive us to drink. What might have begun as a normal relationship has turned into a controlling and abusive situation. They are trying to survive. Their personality is developing the feelings and thoughts needed to survive the situation and lower their emotional and physical risks. All of us have developed attitudes and feelings that help us accept and survive situations. We have these attitudes/feelings about our jobs, our community, and other aspects of our life. As we have found throughout history, the more dysfunctional the situation, the more dysfunctional our adaptation and thoughts to survive. The victim is engaged in an attempt to survive and make a relationship work. Once they decide it doesn't work and can't be fixed, they will need our support as we patiently await their decision to return to a healthy and positive lifestyle.

Family and Friends of the Victim

When a family is confronted with a loved one involved with a Loser or controlling/abusive individual, the situation becomes emotionally painful and socially difficult for the family. While each situation is different, some general guidelines to consider are:

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Your loved one, the "victim" of the Loser/Abuser, has probably been given a choice — the relationship or the family. This choice is made more difficult by the control and intimidation often present in abusive/controlling relationships. Knowing that choosing the family will result in severe personal and social consequences, the family always comes in second. Keep in mind that the victim knows in their heart the family will always love them and accept their return — whenever the return happens.

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Remember, the more you pressure the "victim" of the Loser/Abuser, the more you prove their point. Your loved one is being told the family is trying to ruin their wonderful relationship. Pressure in the form of contacts, comments, and communications will be used as evidence against you. An invitation to a Tupperware party is met with “You see! They just want to get you by yourself so they can tell you bad things about me!” Increasing your contacts is viewed as “putting pressure” on their relationship — not being lovingly concerned.

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Your contacts with your loved one, no matter how routine and loving, may be met with anger and resentment. This is because each contact may prompt the Loser/Abuser to attack them verbally or emotionally. Imagine getting a four-hour lecture every time your Aunt Gladys calls. In a short time, you become angry each time she calls, knowing what the contact will produce in your home. The longer Aunt Gladys talks — the longer your lecture becomes! Thus, when Aunt Gladys calls, you want to get her off the phone as quickly as possible.

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The 1980's song, "Hold on Loosely", may be the key to a good family and friend approach. Holding on too tightly produces more pressure. When the victim is out of the home, it's often best to establish predictable, scheduled contacts. Calling every Wednesday evening, just for a status report or to go over current events, is less threatening than random calls during the week. Random calls are always viewed as "checking up on us" calls. While you may encounter an answering machine, leave a polite and loving message. Importantly, don't discuss the relationship (the controller may be listening!) unless the victim brings it up. The goal of these scheduled calls is to maintain contact, remind your loved one that you are always there to help, and to quietly remind the controller that family and loved ones are nearby and haven't disappeared.

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Try to maintain traditional and special contacts with your loved one — holidays, special occasions, etc. Keep your contacts short and brief, with no comments that can be used as evidence. Contacts made at "traditional" times — holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, etc. — are not as threatening to a controller/abuser. Contacts that provide information, but not questions, are also not as threatening. An example might be a simple card reading "Just a note to let you know that your brother landed a new job this week. You might see him on a Wal-Mart commercial any day now. Love, Mom and Dad". This approach allows the victim to recognize that the family is there — waiting in the wings if needed. It also lessens the lectures/tantrums provided by the Loser as the contacts are on a traditional and expected basis. It's also hard to be angry about brother's new job without looking ridiculous. Also, don't invent holidays or send a reminder that it's Sigmund Freud's birthday. That's suspicious...even in my family.

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Remember that there are many channels of communication. It's important that we keep a channel open if at all possible. Communication channels might include phone calls, letters, cards, and e-mail. Scheduled monthly shopping trips or outings are helpful if possible. The goal is to maintain contact while your loved one is involved in the controlling/abusive relationship. Remember, the goal is contact, not pressure.

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Don't feel the victim's behavior is against the family or friends. It may be a form of survival or a way of lowering stress. Victims may be very resistive, angry, and even hostile due to the complexity of their relationship with the controller/abuser. They may even curse, threaten, and accuse loved ones and friends. This hostile defensiveness is actually self-protection in the relationship — an attempt to avoid "trouble".

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The victim needs to know and feel they are not rejected because of their behavior. Keep in mind, they are painfully aware of their situation. They know they are being treated badly and/or controlled by their partner. Frequent reminders of this will only make them want less contact. We naturally avoid people who remind us of things or situations that are emotionally painful.

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Victims may slightly open the door and provide information about their relationship or hint they may be considering leaving. When the door opens, don't jump through with the Marines behind you! Listen and simply offer support such as "You know your family is behind any decision you need to make and at any time you make it." They may be exploring what support is available but may not be ready to call in the troops just yet. Many victims use an "exit plan" that may take months or even years to complete. They may be gathering information at this point, not yet ready for an exit.

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We can get messages to people in two ways — the pipeline and the grapevine. The pipeline is face-to-face, telling the person directly. This seldom happens in Loser situations as controllers and abusers monitor and control contacts with others. However, the grapevine is still open. When we use the grapevine, we send a message to our loved one through another person. Victims of controlling and abusive individuals are often allowed to maintain a relationship with a few people, perhaps a sibling or best friend. We can send our loved one a message through that contact

person, a message that voices our understanding and support. We don't send insults ("Bill is such a jerk!) or put-downs ("If he doesn't get out of this relationship he'll end up crazy!) — we send messages of love and support. We send "I hope she/he (victim) knows the family is concerned and that we love and support them." Comments sent on the grapevine are phrased with the understanding that our loved one will hear them in that manner. Don't talk with a grapevine contact to express anger and threaten to hire a hit man, and then try to send a message of loving support. Be careful what and how the message is provided. The grapevine contact can often get messages to the victim when we can't. It's another way of letting them know we're supporting them, just waiting to help if and when needed.

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Each situation is different. The family may need to seek [counseling](#) support in the community. A family consultation with a [mental health professional](#) or attorney may be helpful if the situation becomes legally complex or there is a significant danger of harm.

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As relatives or friends of a victim involved with a controller or abuser, our normal reaction is to consider dramatic action. We become angry, resentful, and aggressive at times. Our mind fills with a variety of plans that often range from rescue and kidnapping to ambushing the controller/abuser with a ball bat. A rule of thumb is that any aggression toward the controller/abuser will result in additional difficulties for your loved one. Try to remain calm and await an opportunity to show your love and support when your loved one needs it.

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In some cases, as in teenagers and young adults, the family may still provide some financial, insurance, or other support. When we receive angry responses to our phone calls, our anger and resentment tells us to cut off their support. I've heard "If she's going to date that jerk, it's not going to be in a car I'm paying for!" and "If he's choosing that woman over his family, he can drop out of college and flip hamburgers!" Withdrawing financial support only makes your loved one more dependent upon the controller/abuser. Remember, if we're aggressive by threatening, withdrawing support, or pressuring — we become the threatening force, not the controller/abuser. It actually moves the victim into the support of the controller. Sadly, the more of an "ordeal" they experience, the more bonding takes place, as noted with both Stockholm [Syndrome](#) and cognitive dissonance.

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As you might imagine, the combination of Stockholm Syndrome and cognitive dissonance may also be active when our loved one is involved in cults, unusual religions, and other groups. In some situations, the abuser and controller is actually a group or organization. Victims are punished if they are viewed as disloyal to the group. While this article deals with individual relationships, the family guidelines may also be helpful in controlling-group situations.

Final Thoughts

You may be the victim of a controlling and abusive partner, seeking an understanding of your feelings and attitudes. You may have a son, daughter, or friend currently involved with a controlling and abusive partner, looking for ways to understand and help.

If a loved one is involved with a Loser, a controlling and abusing partner, the long-term outcome is difficult to determine due to the many factors involved. If their relationship is in the "dating" phase, they may end the relationship on their own. If the relationship has continued for over a year, they may require support and an exit plan before ending the relationship. Marriage and children further complicate their ability to leave the situation. When the victim decides to end the unhappy relationship, it's important that they view loved ones as supportive, loving, and understanding — not as a source of pressure, guilt, or aggression.

This article is an attempt to understand the complex feelings and attitudes that are as puzzling to the victim as they are to family and friends. Separately, I've outlined recommendations for detaching from a Loser or controlling/abusive individual, but clearly, there are more victims in this

~~situation. It is hoped this article is helpful to family and friends who worry, cry, and have difficulty understanding the situation of their loved one.~~
It has been said that knowledge is power. Hopefully this knowledge will prove helpful and powerful to victims and their loved ones.

Please consider this article as a general guideline. Some recommendations may be appropriate and helpful while some may not apply to a specific situation. In many cases, we may need additional professional help of a mental health or legal nature.

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