# Why Women Stay: The Paradox of Abusive Relationships

|  |
| --- |
| [Eliana Dockterman](http://time.com/author/eliana-dockterman/) [@edockterman](https://twitter.com/edockterman) Sept. 9, 2014 |

After a video was released showing Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice punching his then-fiancée, now-wife Janay Palmer so hard that he knocked her unconscious, victims of domestic abuse took to Twitter to explain why Palmer still decided to become Mrs. Rice after the incident. Some on Twitter [shared their own experiences with the hashtag #WhyIStayed.](http://time.com/3307109/twitter-ray-rice-domestic-violence-abuse-whyistayed-whyileft/) There have been over 92,000 tweets on the subject since 1 a.m. Monday when the video was posted.

The tweets give a chilling insight into why many women (and some men) feel trapped in relationships of domestic abuse. Beverly Gooden, a writer who started #WhyIStayed on Twitter, [writes on her site](http://www.beverlygooden.com/hear/) that for her, leaving an abusive situation was “a process, not an event.” She explained in a series of tweets the many reasons it took her so long to get out: she once tried to leave the house, but her abuser slept in front of the door to block her; a pastor told her that God hates divorce; her husband said he would change; she needed time to find a place to go and money to survive once she left; she thought love conquered all; she was isolated from friends and family who lived halfway across the country.

Gooden’s story is a common one. One in four women experience domestic abuse in their lifetime, and it is one of the most chronically underreported crimes: only about one quarter of all physical assaults, one fifth of all rapes and one half of all stalkings are reported to the police.

Experts say that the limitations of leaving can be both psychological and physical. Many rationalize their situation. “People wind up blaming themselves for the abusive behavior of their partners,” says Craig Malkin, a clinical psychologist at Harvard Medical School. “They convince themselves if they approach the person differently, maybe they won’t be abused.”

Malkin likened a relationship with an abusive partner to gambling addiction: “The person being abused is focused on the positive and waiting for the next positive. There’s a psychological effect like gambling: the moments of tenderness and intimacy are unpredictable, but they are so intense and fulfilling that the victim winds up staying in the hopes that a moment like that will happen again.”

“Eventually there’s sort of this wearing down for people on the receiving end of the abuse where they continue to tolerate more and over time feel less entitled to safety,” he concludes.

So perhaps it’s not surprising that Janay Rice stayed with Ray Rice after the incident that the whole nation is now watching on repeat. And while we don’t know if Mrs. Rice continues to live with abuse, we do know that her private life has become unbearably public. In response to all the speculation and the judgmental comments, she took to Instagram to defend her marriage:

“No one knows the pain that the media & unwanted options from the public has caused my family. To make us relive a moment in our lives that we regret every day is a horrible thing,” [she wrote](http://time.com/3308901/janay-rice-ray-rice-nfl-baltimore-ravens/). “If your intentions were to hurt us, embarrass us, make us feel alone, take all happiness away, you’ve succeeded on so many levels. Just know we will continue to grow & show the world what real love is!”

Some criticized the statement, while others expressed their sympathy. Many were just confused. But Ruth Glenn, the executive director of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, urges people to withhold judgment when questioning why Janay Rice stayed. “For some who don’t understand domestic violence it may be hard [to remember Palmer is the victim],” Glenn says. “But I am certain that she has fallen in love with Mr. Rice, and it is not surprising after such an assault that she would still be in love with him. I hope people will take a moment and reflect on the emotions you feel in a relationship before passing judgment on her.”

Rice’s explanations for the events also give us insight into her decisions. She has consistently laid blame on both herself and Ray Rice. In the video, you can see her physically squabbling with him before he punches her, and both were arrested after the incident. Malkin says that Rice may be using her own violent acts to rationalize the abuse.

“People come to accept subtler forms of physical abuse at first, and very often it’s both people in the relationship who are doing that sort of thing,” he says. “So they tell themselves, ‘Okay I did sort of push him or her, so it’s kind of my fault that they knocked me out.’ It’s of course both partner’s responsibility to establish a sense of emotional and physical safety int he relationship. But the responsibility of a person who lashes out in such a violent manner as Ray Rice did in the video, that falls entirely to that person.”

Sometimes abusers will use the victims’ rationalizations to their advantage. Studies have also shown that domestic abuse and emotional abuse go hand-in-hand. According to the NCADV, psychological terrorism can keep victims from leaving: tactics include withholding food, water or medicine; sleep depravation; total isolation; extortion or blackmail; murder of pets; physical violence; and rape. Studies show that abused women often experience a kind of Stockholm Syndrome in which a victim comes to identify with and become attached to a captor.

Leslie Morgan Steiner, who has written a book on her abusive relationship Crazy Love, addresses such psychological warfare in her [Ted Talk](https://www.ted.com/talks/leslie_morgan_steiner_why_domestic_violence_victims_don_t_leave#t-667743) on the subject. She explains that the first step in any abusive relationship is to seduce the victim and make them feel like they are the ones in control.

Research also shows that abusers are drawn to people who already feel powerless in other aspects of their life. These people question their own worth and thus do not consider whether their needs are being met. Predators build up the victim’s self-esteem before introducing the abuse. Many were victims of domestic abuse as children or grew up with parents who were in an abusive relationship. “They don’t have a model for anything different,” explains Malkin. “They accept it as the price of intimacy.”

Steiner says that once an abuser has made the victim feel special, he or she isolates him or her. Only then does the abuser introduce the threat of violence.

“Why did I stay?” she asks in her Ted Talk. “I didn’t know he was abusing me. Even though he held those loaded guns to my head, pushed me down stairs, threatened to kill our dog, pulled the key out of the car ignition as I drove down the highway, poured coffee grinds on my head as a dressed for a job interview, I never once thought of myself as a battered wife. Instead I was a very strong woman in love with a deeply troubled man, and I was the only person on earth who could help [him] face his demons.”

She adds that it can be dangerous to leave an abuser because the final step in the domestic violence pattern is to kill the victim. Over 70% of domestic violence murders happen after the victim has left the relationship. What finally compelled her to leave was a final beating that convinced her she was no longer safe. She combatted her abusive husband by sharing her story—telling everyone she knows. Something similar is happening with #WhyIStayed.

Increasingly, social media is being used as a platform to discuss issues of abuse and rape. In March, a spontaneous debate about victim blaming emerged on Twitter when one user suggested that women who wear revealing outfits are at fault if they are sexually assaulted. Women and men [responded with the hashtag #RapeHasNoUniform](http://time.com/25150/rape-victims-talk-about-tweeting-their-experiences-publicly/) in which victims shared the clothes they were wearing when they were raped. At the time, Scott Berkowitz, President and Founder of the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN) said he was not surprised that so many people took to Twitter to share such experiences. “Having this whole community of other people who have been through something similar can be really empowering for people” he said. “I think there’s safety in numbers.”

Nobody can speak for Janay Rice other than Janay Rice, so we may never know why she is still in a relationship with the football player. But her reaction has sparked a conversation helps victims know they are not alone.