

Victims of Domestic Violence Can Experience Empowerment Through Self-Validation and Self-Empathy

With Eddie Zacapa

Leaving an abusive relationship may seem the best option in cases of domestic violence. Yet, many victims of domestic violence stay. There are many reasons why someone will stay in an abusive relationship. It may be that their partner has threatened to harm them or their children. They do not want to break up the family, they may not have a job, they have nowhere to go, or do not have the economic means to survive. They may fear losing the kids in a custody battle, and/or they may be so isolated that they have no phone or way of contacting anyone to make arrangements to leave.

When a victim of domestic violence leaves a relationship, they are at the most risk of harm or death. A person who is experiencing violence knows this. That is why we do well to honor their choice. It is tempting to judge and tell them what to do, but rarely does this connect and build trust with someone who is experiencing domestic violence.

At this time, when many people are being asked to shelter in place and stay home due to COVID-19, many individuals experiencing abuse and domestic violence may believe that they do not have a choice but to stay.

Regardless of the reason, many individuals endure abuse and stay. Staying in an abusive relationship is no easy path to tread. There is not much information out there to help those who stay. Some individuals can reach out to domestic violence counselors or hotlines, but some are not allowed to by their partner.

This is where validation can really help someone in this situation navigate the toxic relationship, and even possibly give them the strength to leave when it becomes a more viable option.

Creating the Space to Be With Our Pain

Yung Pueblo writes, "Before I could release the weight of my sadness and pain, I first had to honor its existence."

By finding the space to become aware of our own feelings, needs and experience, we can validate what we are going through. When we can validate what we are feeling, needing and experiencing we give voice to our pain and it is not as heavy as it was initially. We claim our experience and are not denying or dodging what is real. This is powerful because we start to claim our truth.

When we do this for ourselves it is called self-validation or self-empathy. For instance, if someone told us that we were a worthless, stupid, good for nothing mother, we could (when safe) take time to check in with ourselves, and connect with what we are experiencing and feeling, and really longing for in that moment.

We may say to ourselves, "I am really sad, hurt, upset and angry because I really want to matter to someone. I want recognition and consideration and care. I really long for understanding, honor and dignity and peace in my home."

It is important to stay with this even though it may be uncomfortable. Tears may arise and possibly sobbing. That is alright because we are releasing the weight of the pain we are carrying. We are bringing awareness to our experience. We may breathe and give ourselves time to take all this in. As

we breathe we can imagine that we are breathing in our truth.

A friend or a counselor who really listens and offers us their presence can sometimes offer this type of empathy or validation. But we each can offer ourselves this self-empathy. When we do this, we may feel a bit lighter and not so constricted and tight. We also will not be so reactive or defensive and filled with resentment.

There is also a new awareness of what we need or really long for and this can help us come up with a plan to try to attain and fulfill those needs. Our partner may not be fulfilling our needs for mattering, care and honor but we can fulfill these needs by mattering to ourselves, caring for our needs and honoring ourselves.

We can give ourselves understanding for what we are going through and find that by doing so we may not react in anger or get depressed, and we may possibly find peace in the midst of chaos, even if it is just for that moment. We can even imagine what it would be like to have these needs fulfilled, or possibly connect with a time or memory when they truly were. This lets us connect to the energy of what is really important to us, and want to do more to fulfill our need(s).

Holding Space to Validate Our Children's Needs

By doing this we can also offer this practice to our children and hold with them their feelings and needs and help validate their experience. We can become curious about what they might be experiencing, feeling, and longing for, and help them give voice to it so that they are not carrying the weight of the abuse without processing it.

We can say, "I imagine you might be feeling ... and that you might be really longing for ..."

This may lead to them crying or wanting to be held by you. You can support each other and communicate with each other whenever you are in pain. You can be a safe container for them to be able to process life.

Sometimes when we do this we realize that our longing and theirs are very much the same. Sometimes that will give us the strength to try to create a better story, possibly leave the relationship, or seek help from a counselor to see if those needs and longings can be fulfilled somehow.

Miki Kashtan writes, "Being conscious of my needs, finding acceptance for them, and embracing the discomfort of being with my feelings form the foundation that gives me more freedom to respond to life."

The next step may be to imagine whether these longings and needs can be fulfilled by the partner who is doing the abuse. It is important to accept the limitations of the other person without giving up what is important to us, and the validation we have come to experience. If it becomes clear that there is an impasse, then it may be time to explore other ways to meet our needs and those of our children. We may want to seek help from a domestic violence center, a domestic violence counselor or shelter.

When we can give voice to what is important to us, what we need – we can then advocate for what we value.

Resources for victims of domestic violence:

National Domestic Violence Hotline (available 24/7)

Call 1-800-799-7233 or text LOVE IS to 22522

National Sexual Assault Hotline (available 24/7)

1-800-656-4673

Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline

1-800-422-4453