



Why She Stays

Understanding the realities behind an abusive relationship

A three-part community education series

When Staying Feels Safer Than Leaving

The Invisible Walls Around Her

Love Hope and the Long Road to Leaving

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ABOUT THIS SERIES

Understanding Why She Stays

Domestic violence is often discussed through a single question: Why does she stay? That question places attention on the survivor's decisions instead of the danger, control and barriers created by the person causing harm.

As a NOA board member, I want our community to ask a more useful question: What would make safety possible? This booklet looks at the fear, practical obstacles and emotional ties that can make leaving an abusive relationship extraordinarily difficult.

This series uses 'she' because women represent many domestic-violence survivors, but abuse can affect people of every gender, age, background and circumstance.

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NOA serves Lumpkin and Dawson counties with free and confidential support, shelter, advocacy and education.

24-hour crisis line 706-864-1986

SAFETY

When Staying Feels Safer Than Leaving

Years ago, NOA shared the story of a young pregnant woman who entered its shelter after leaving an abusive relationship several times.

She had endured severe physical and emotional abuse. With shelter, counseling, case management and continued advocacy, she eventually found employment, bought a car and began living independently with her daughter.

Her story reminds us of something we often misunderstand: leaving an abusive relationship is rarely one simple decision.

As a NOA board member, I believe one of the most important things our community can learn is to replace the question 'Why does she stay?' with 'What makes leaving so dangerous?'

When leaving increases the danger

An abusive relationship is often built around power and control. When an abuser believes he is losing that control, threats, stalking, intimidation or violence may escalate.

The survivor frequently understands that danger better than anyone else. She has learned to read a change in his expression, voice or behavior. She may know that mentioning separation could put her, her children, another family member or a pet in immediate danger.

What looks like indecision from the outside may be careful survival planning.

She may be asking:

- Will he find me?
- Will he hurt my children?
- Will he carry out the threats he has made?
- Where can I go that he does not already know about?
- What will happen if he discovers I asked for help?

SAFETY CONTINUED

Remaining where the danger is familiar can sometimes feel safer than provoking a danger she cannot predict.

Survival does not always look like resistance

We often imagine that a person facing danger will either fight or run. But survivors may also freeze, become emotionally numb, comply with demands or try to calm the abuser. These are human survival responses.

Appeasing an abuser is not consent. Returning home does not mean the abuse was untrue. Remaining quiet does not mean she is not afraid. Her actions may be the strategies that have helped her and her children survive.

If someone confides in you

Do not pressure her to leave before she has a plan. Instead, say:

- I believe you.
- This is not your fault.
- You do not deserve to be treated this way.
- I am concerned about your safety.
- How can I support you?
- Would you like help contacting NOA?

Avoid confronting the abuser yourself. That could increase the danger. A trained advocate can help the survivor consider her options and develop an individualized safety plan.

The better question is not 'Why does she stay?' It is 'What would make safety possible?'

Need help

NOA provides free, confidential assistance in Lumpkin and Dawson counties. Call the 24-hour crisis line at 706-864-1986. Call 911 if there is immediate danger.

Help make safety possible with a one-time gift or a recurring Be the Change donation - monthly, quarterly, biannually or annually: noonealone.org/i-want-to-help/donate/

BARRIERS

The Invisible Walls Around Her

There may be no locked door, visible chain or guard preventing her from walking away.

Yet a survivor can be surrounded by barriers that are every bit as confining: no money, no transportation, nowhere to live, children to protect, a job placed at risk and a pet she cannot safely leave behind.

These barriers are especially significant in rural communities like Lumpkin and Dawson counties, where housing, transportation and specialized services may be separated by long distances.

As the only domestic-violence program serving Lumpkin and Dawson counties, NOA serves an average of approximately 2,500 clients each year. In 2025, NOA served 2,781 clients, responded to over 2,500 crisis calls and sheltered 99 different people in its shelter and local motels.

Financial abuse and employment sabotage

An abuser may withhold bank cards, ruin her credit, create debt in her name or require an explanation for every purchase. He may prevent her from working, make her late, repeatedly call her workplace, destroy work clothing or create disturbances that place her employment at risk.

In an exploratory study of 120 intimate-partner-violence survivors, 94 percent experienced some form of economic abuse and 78 percent reported employment sabotage.[1] These findings came from a specific survivor population and should not be interpreted as the rate among all survivors. They demonstrate how financial control and workplace interference can occur together.

Without income, savings or usable credit, 'just leave' may mean facing homelessness, hunger or an inability to care for her children.

BARRIERS CONTINUED**Children housing and rural distance**

A survivor may fear losing custody, disrupting her children's education or being forced to share unsupervised parenting time with the abusive partner.

Affordable housing may be difficult to find. Public transportation is limited in much of our area, and the survivor may not have reliable access to a vehicle. Rural survivors can also fear that someone at work, church, school or in the community will recognize them, disclose their location or judge them for seeking help.

Pets are part of the safety decision

An abuser may threaten or harm a pet to frighten the survivor or force her to return. Across foundational studies, 18%-48% of pet-owning survivors reported delaying shelter entry or leaving because they feared for their pets' welfare.[3, 4] Asking 'What about your pet?' can be an important part of safety planning - not a minor detail.

What NOA makes possible

NOA does far more than provide emergency shelter. Its free and confidential services include:

- A 24-hour crisis line (706-864-1986), safety planning and emergency shelter
- Food, clothing, personal necessities, transportation and medical assistance
- Legal advocacy and help understanding protective orders
- Case management, counseling, support groups and children's services
- Help exploring housing, employment, childcare and education
- Limited financial assistance, referrals and community education

Individuals, businesses, churches and civic organizations can help remove these invisible walls by supporting NOA financially, donating needed items, volunteering and educating others.

The better question is not 'Why does she stay?' It is 'What would make safety possible?'

Need help

NOA provides free, confidential assistance in Lumpkin and Dawson counties. Call the 24-hour crisis line at 706-864-1986. Call 911 if there is immediate danger.

Legal advocates: Lumpkin County 706-344-2373 | Dawson County 706-972-4819

Help remove an invisible wall with a one-time gift or a recurring Be the Change donation - monthly, quarterly, biannually or annually: noonealone.org/i-want-to-help/donate/

HOPE

Love Hope and the Long Road to Leaving

She may still love him.

That may be one of the hardest truths for friends and family to understand.

People often assume fear is the only reason someone remains in an abusive relationship. But she may also be carrying love, loyalty, hope, shame, grief and memories of the person she believed he was.

Abuse does not erase those emotions. It often uses them.

The relationship did not begin this way

Most abusive relationships do not begin with obvious cruelty. They may begin with affection, attentiveness and promises of a future together.

Control can enter gradually. Jealousy is described as love. Constant messages seem protective. Isolation is presented as wanting more time together.

Periods of abuse may then be followed by remorse, affection, gifts and promises. He may begin counseling, stop drinking temporarily or swear that it will never happen again. Those calmer periods restore hope. Hope is not weakness or foolishness. It is human.

When faith becomes part of the struggle

Faith may be an important source of strength, identity and community for a survivor. It can also complicate her decision to leave. She may fear disappointing her faith community or believe that leaving means she has failed spiritually. An abusive partner may misuse religious teachings to demand obedience, forgiveness or silence.

True faith should never be used to excuse violence, force reconciliation or require someone to remain in danger. A compassionate faith response protects life, dignity and safety while placing responsibility for the abuse on the person choosing it.

HOPE CONTINUED**Leaving is usually a process**

A survivor may leave and return more than once. That does not mean the abuse was exaggerated or that she no longer wants safety.

She may return because the threats increased, the children were distressed, housing fell through, money ran out or her partner promised to change. Each attempt may help her understand what she needs and how her safety plan must change.

Leaving may begin quietly: telling one trusted person, saving documents, putting aside money or calling an advocate. It may take time before safety feels possible.

From forgotten to supported

A survivor identified as Katie shared through NOA that its support helped restore her faith and trust in herself. Her words were simple and painful: 'Without NOA, I would still be forgotten.'

No survivor in Lumpkin or Dawson County should feel forgotten. That is why continued support matters - even if she is not ready to leave, even if she returns and even if her path does not follow the timeline others expect.

How to remain supportive

- I believe you.
- You are not responsible for his behavior.
- I will not judge you.
- I will still be here when you are ready.
- We can contact NOA together.

Supporting her does not mean approving of the relationship. It means preserving a trusted connection that the abuser may be working to destroy.

The better question is not 'Why does she stay?' It is 'What would make safety possible?'

Even after she leaves, the story is not over. Separation may bring new dangers, practical challenges and a long process of rebuilding. That is where the next series, After She Leaves, will begin.

Need help

NOA provides free, confidential assistance in Lumpkin and Dawson counties. Call the 24-hour crisis line at 706-864-1986. Call 911 if there is immediate danger.

Help ensure no survivor is forgotten with a one-time gift or a recurring Be the Change donation - monthly, quarterly, biannually or annually: noonealone.org/i-want-to-help/donate/

GLOSSARY

Words That Help Explain the Experience

These terms describe patterns survivors may experience. They are tools for understanding - never labels for judging an individual survivor.

Coercive control. Ongoing threats, monitoring, isolation or restrictions used to take away freedom and independence.

Domestic violence / intimate partner violence (IPV). Physical, sexual, emotional, economic or technological abuse, or stalking, by a current or former partner.

Economic and financial abuse. Controlling money, credit, property, employment or access to financial resources.

Employment sabotage. Interfering with work or school through harassment, transportation or childcare disruption.

Gaslighting. Denying or distorting experiences until a person doubts her memory or judgment.

Isolation. Cutting a person off from family, friends, work, transportation, faith or support.

Safety plan. A personalized plan to reduce risk before, during or after leaving.

Survival response. Automatic reactions to danger, including fight, flight, freeze, shutdown or appeasement.

Trauma bond. A powerful attachment reinforced when harm alternates with relief, affection or promises.

Cycle of abuse. A repeating pattern of tension, harm, apology and calm; experiences vary.

Protective order. A civil court order limiting an abuser's contact or conduct.

Post-separation abuse. Harassment, threats or control that continues or intensifies after separation.

Stalking. Repeated unwanted contact, monitoring, following or threats that cause fear.

Technological abuse. Using devices, accounts or location tools to monitor, threaten or control.

Trauma-informed support. Help that prioritizes safety, choice and dignity and avoids blame.

Survivor. A person who has experienced abuse; the term recognizes strength and agency.

Understanding the language of abuse helps us recognize how danger, control and limited options shape a survivor's choices.

A reminder about language

No single term captures a survivor's full experience. Listen, believe her, avoid blame and connect her with trained support when she wants it.

Believe her. Respect her decisions. Help her remain connected. Keep the focus on safety.

NOA RESOURCES

Help Is Available

NOA provides free and confidential services to survivors in Lumpkin and Dawson counties.

- 24-hour crisis line: 706-864-1986
- Administrative office: 706-344-3853
- Lumpkin County legal advocate: 706-344-2373
- Dawson County legal advocate: 706-972-4819
- Immediate danger: Call 911

Learn more or become a Be the Change donor: noonealone.org/bethechange/

Sources and further reading

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- Rural Health Information Hub. Violence and Abuse in Rural America. ruralhealthinfo.org/toolkits/violence-and-abuse
- National Domestic Violence Hotline. Safety Planning. thehotline.org/plan-for-safety/
- Safe Havens for Pets. RedRover. safehavensforpets.org/

This booklet provides general education, not individualized legal or safety advice. A trained NOA advocate can help a survivor consider her specific circumstances and options.



NOA provides safe haven and support services to victims of domestic violence.

Through educational programs, NOA works to foster attitudes in the community that violence is not acceptable.

24 HOUR CRISIS LINE

706 864 1986

FREE AND CONFIDENTIAL

noonealone.org



Scan to visit NOA Be the Change and choose a one-time or recurring gift.

Serving Lumpkin and Dawson counties