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My boyfriend hits me: Should I go back to him? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I've been with my boyfriend for over two years now. We were great during the first year, but our relationship has become abusive. I remembered that I was the one who first laid a hand on my boyfriend. Then, that's when it all started. Every time we get into a fight, it frequently ends in violence. But now he becomes the aggressor. He's the one who hits me first. I don't hit back anymore, but this doesn't seem to stop him. He ended up taking me to the hospital to get stitches in my head after he hit me. The hospital asked questions and I covered up for him, but the police didn't believe me and arrested him. He said he's going to a counseling program to get better. He still loves me and realized the horrible things he has done. He said he wants to get back together after the program. Is there a chance for him to get better? Should I go back to him?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Relationships can be complex, and even more so when they're abusive. Abusive relationships aren't bad all the time — there often are a lot of good times that can seem to outweigh the verbal, emotional, or physical abuse leading to people staying with their partner. However, even the presence of those good moments doesn't mean that it's a healthy relationship for any of the involved parties. Based on your question it seems like you may be confused about your role in the violence, particularly the times when you hit your boyfriend. Having reflected on your own behavior is key, particularly as violence perpetrated by either partner isn't conducive to a healthy relationship. To answer your question about whether someone can stop being violent, there's really no way of definitively knowing. With that being said, ultimately, the decision to go back to him or not is up to you. Read on for some factors to consider as you're making this decision.

Domestic and dating violence often encompass more than physical violence — it's rooted in trying to exert power and control over a partner. Because of that it can also include emotional and psychological abuse. This can take the form of criticizing a partner, putting them down, trying to isolate them from friends, or keeping tabs on where they are at all times.

As you think through and reflect on your situation, it might be good to consider a few questions: What started this cycle of abuse? Are there other forms of abuse present in your relationship?

Have you brought up your concerns before? How did he react? Has he made promises to stop this behavior? Have you talked about how you both can communicate better? These questions will hopefully highlight trends in his behavior to help you get a sense of his ability to change this behavior. Although your boyfriend loves you and knows that what he did to you was wrong, the fact remains: someone whom you love and trust hurt you, which can be painful and difficult to understand. There may be hope in knowing that he wants to change his violent behavior because in order to change he must be willing to do so and also have the coping skills to know *how* to do just that. A violence intervention program, such as the one your boyfriend is in, *could* help. Unfortunately, research shows that patterns of violence are often deeply rooted and can be difficult to change. It can take years for someone to alter violent behavior, and they must make a concerted and consistent effort.

Making a decision to stay or leave can be extremely difficult and complicated, and it's not something most people "figure out" in a day or two. It's wise to take your time to figure out the best decision for you. Knowing some characteristics of healthy versus unhealthy relationships might be helpful when considering what you want from a partnership, and whether or not these needs can be met in your current one. There are ways that you can look at and evaluate your situation that might help you to explore what you want to do, and what your next steps will be. You could ask yourself: Will I ever be able to feel fully safe with him? What are my reasons for wanting to go back? Am I afraid of being alone, or not having him in my life? What would my life be like without him? You may choose to reflect on these questions by yourself or with a mental health professional. As your boyfriend is getting help and counseling, you might consider what support would be most helpful to you. Making a major decision can be daunting, but talking to people to help clarify your feelings and needs may help you figure out what decision is best. If you do choose to get back together with him, here are some questions to consider beforehand: What are my boundaries in this relationship? What do I consider to be non-negotiable? What are the actions or behaviors, that if he displays them, will cause me to evaluate leaving the relationship? Considering these questions and setting up the boundaries can help you re-enter the relationship with an understanding of how you will move forward together.

If you do decide to leave, you may want to come up with a plan in advance to help ensure your safety. It can be helpful to keep documentation of your injuries, violent incidents, and any visits to a health care provider or emergency room due to physical abuse. Additionally, you may think about setting aside any money you may need and look into what skills or schooling would be necessary to support yourself. You can also make yourself familiar with support resources that could help you. It'll also be good to have all of your identifying documents and legal paperwork in order to protect yourself. You can learn more about creating a safety plan from the [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#) [2].

Hopefully this helped provide some guidance as you move forward.

Alice!

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