

Deal Breakers: How to Avoid Marrying an Abuser

By Natalie Klejwa
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Email From a Reader:

About a year ago you did a few posts about what [guys](#) and [gals](#) are looking for (and NOT looking for) in relationships. After following your blog for the last year, and reading through the many comments, I see that you are not alone in naming abuse and getting recognition for what it is. As a young, unmarried woman, it is unsettling to hear so many married Christian women reply over and over in the comment section-"yes, this is my story too", "...and me too...for 20 years..."

How can the current 20-something women be a generation that doesn't repeat this struggle? I'm relating this back to the articles about dating- specifically what young women are looking for- because I recognize that there is no Mr. Perfect and we won't marry Jesus...but I don't desire an abusive marriage. God uses even devastatingly hard relationships for his purposes, yet I know that because God places value on me, being in an abusive relationship is not his desire for me.

I know there's no secret formula- as long as we are in a relationship with another human being, abuse is possible- and that's where our own ability to roar has to be developed. But if abuse- and silenced abuse- is so prevalent in Christian marriages, do you think there are "warnings" or "red flags" we can look out for as young women, to avoid marrying into an abusive relationship?

This is an important question. I think there are almost always red flags waving high, but very few young people are willing to acknowledge them when passions are waving higher. We've all experienced this either in our own lives or as we've observed the lives of other young people. It's all about the here and now. The feelings. The romance. The dream. The excitement. The longings fulfilled.

Nobody wants to be practical and think about uncomfortable things. *How dull.*

The stone-cold fact is, if a young person refuses to look carefully at the other person from all angles, taking time to observe them objectively and get the input of other objective observers, the feelings, romance, dream, excitement, and fulfilled longings will end abruptly at the altar.

And then there's the long "and they lived unhappily ever after."

I'm not talking about the normal transition from the amazing drama of the dating days to the daily grind. Everyone goes through that and *grows* through that. I'm talking about when you wake up and realize with horror that you are married to an abusive spouse.

How can you avoid this?

An abuser doesn't introduce himself like this, "Hello - it's nice to meet you. I'd like to take you on a whirlwind romance, sweep you off your feet, marry you, and then abuse you until death do us part." Noooooo ma'am. They follow in the footsteps of their father, the devil. They enter your world like an angel of light. A thing of beauty and wonder.

They might be super-de-duper nice. Like Barney.

They might worship the ground you walk on.

They might be very religious. Think Ghandi.

They might tell you that you *complete* them. (Watch out with that one.)

They might do good deeds. Like Mother Theresa.

They might be charming. Attractive. Kind. Thoughtful. Spiritual.

You might find them in, or jockeying for, leadership positions.

They might be confident and charismatic.

They might live generously (recklessly?)

Time is your ally. Take advantage of ***time*** in order to see what the potential mate is like under pressure. You will want to ask yourself several questions, and then listen to and respect the answers you give.

1. What happens when you give him negative feedback about something he has done?

An abusive person cannot accept negative feedback.

They will chafe. At the beginning of the relationship, you might just see him shut down a bit. Grow a little cold. Silent. But as the relationship progresses you will see anger.

Some abusers will express their anger with words and shouting. Others may even use physical violence if they feel that you already "belong" to them.

If anyone ever (even just once!) touches you in a violent way - and this includes just grabbing your arm or pushing against you a little - get out of that relationship immediately. If you aren't even married yet, and they are already doing that, you will be the target of increased physical abuse once the knot is tied. When a physical abuser "owns" you, he will stop at nothing to control you. Don't think that just because someone calls himself a "Christian" - that he will grow out of it. I personally know women who believed that and lived to regret it. The church is one of the best hiding places for an abusive individual because they know Christians are often gullible about stuff like this.

Some abusers may express their anger in passive ways. This is called **covert aggression**. It's a manipulative technique meant to make you feel guilty for calling them out on their behavior and get you to actually believe that you are the guilty party. [Dr. George Simon](#) puts it like this:

Covert-aggression is at the heart of most interpersonal manipulation. What the artful, subtle fighter knows is that if they can get you to doubt yourself, feel like you have to explain yourself, and question your perceptions and judgment, there's a good chance they can get you to back down, back-off, or better still, cave-in. Covert fighters count on the fact that you won't trust your gut instincts or pass simple judgment on their character or the true character of their actions. They count on you being far too conscientious for that. And they know that if they don't come across as openly out to defy the generally accepted rules for civil behavior, exploit your good nature, and get the better of you, you'll ignore that feeling in your gut that tells you you're simply being played.

Covert aggression is probably the most common type of abuse found in Christian marriages. It's deceptive and hard to detect. It destroys entire families in a slow, methodical way. I'd be willing to bet that many of you are living with it, and *some of you don't even know it yet*. You just know that something is horribly wrong, and you can't seem to fix it no matter how hard you try.

Ask yourself: *Does your spouse respond humbly to the negative feedback you give him?* If your answer is *rarely* or *never* - you are probably living in an emotionally destructive marriage.

A healthy person accepts negative feedback and grows from it.

If the person you are dating appreciates the feedback you give him, and if you actually see him implementing change in his life, you may be working with some healthy spouse material. The Bible calls this humility, and it makes for good relationships. Pride is the opposite of humility - and even God is opposed to the proud.

2. What happens when you have needs?

An abusive person has very little or no empathy (although they can fake it quite nicely when necessary).

Empathy: *identification with and understanding of another's situation, feelings, and motives.*

An abusive person can't put themselves in another person's shoes. If you lose someone or something you love, the abuser can't relate. They want you to get over it. If you are sick, that cramps their style. You are no longer able to meet their needs. It annoys the crap out of them. If you are sad about something or mad about something or glad about something, an abuser can't enter into your sorrow, angst, or joy. Life is about them, not you.

A healthy person demonstrates empathy and concern for the needs of others.

They are interested in your life. Your thoughts. Your hopes. What makes you tick. They want to learn more about you, and you fascinate them, not because of what you offer to their existence, but because of who you are as part of God's creation.

3. What happens when what you like is different from what he likes?

An abusive person has to have his way.

This is where the teaching *that the man gets to have his way in all things, and the woman is godly insofar as she gives it to him*, comes into play. Abusers cling to this teaching tenaciously, and use it to feed their flesh. The Bible calls this selfishness, and it destroys relationships.

Sometimes the guy will let you have your way if it doesn't matter much to him. He'll make a big show of it to make sure you've taken note that he is a magnanimous, unselfish person. But try pressing him on something that really matters and see what comes out.

A healthy person is willing to compromise and negotiate.

He is willing to let you have your way when he knows it is important to you. It's respecting and honoring the desires of others and taking them into consideration *because it delights you to do so*. [Healthy boundaries](#) make healthy relationships.

4. How does he communicate what he's thinking?

Does he come right out and say it? Or does he use communication tactics? Here are a few:

1. Does he tell jokes that let you "in" on what he believes about things? (i.e. racial jokes, sexual jokes, dumb blonde jokes, etc.) Or maybe he just says something off the wall - and then when you ask him about it, he says, "Gee whiz. I was only JOKING." Red Flag.
2. Does he avoid giving straight answers?
3. Does he use guilt to get you to do what he wants?
4. Does he want you and others to pity him?
5. Do you feel intimidated by him?
6. Do you feel like he doesn't care to understand you?
7. Does he expect you to read his mind?
8. Does he blame you every time something goes wrong in the relationship?
9. Does he say negative things about your family? Friends? Job?
10. Is he constantly correcting you?
11. Is he critical of you? Even in small ways?
12. Does he tell you how to wear your hair, what type of clothing he likes, how he wants you to act, look, or behave?
13. Have you ever caught him in a lie, a half-lie, or a lie by omission? (Where they leave out some information about something so you don't have the full picture?) If he lies at all, he is a liar,

and you are in for a life of never knowing what is up or down. A life of total confusion and chaos. Never. Ever. Marry a liar. Ever. Lying is a relationship killer.

14. Does he go out of his way to tell you that he would NEVER—look at porn, cheat on you, lie to you, drink, etc.? Someone who is hiding something will do that. Someone who isn't doing those things probably won't even think of mentioning it because it isn't an issue in their lives.

5. What are his behaviors like?

1. Is he chronically late to everything?

This indicates he cares little for the time of others and feels entitled to show up any time he darn well pleases. It's a control thing. *(PLEASE - I'm not talking about occasionally being late to something. I'm talking about consistent lateness combined with a bunch of other red flags. Put the pieces together. Don't make a case with just one piece.)*

2. Does he want to control your time and get jealous when you spend time with other people or cultivate other relationships?

3. Is he constantly changing jobs because he was mistreated or unappreciated at work? Get out now. He is unable to take responsibility for his behaviors. If others are ending their relationships with him, chances are, you will want to end yours, too.

4. How does he treat his family members? Servers at restaurants? People in traffic? Is he honoring and patient? Or not?

5. Is he open and honest about his past, or is it like pulling teeth to get him to open up and share anything? If he is vague or reluctant to share private things from his past, then he is hiding from you. This is fine at the beginning of a relationship, but never tie the knot with someone who has something to hide. If there is shame that he hasn't dealt with at the cross, he will deal with it at your expense through abuse.

6. Is he a good steward of his money, time, gifts, and resources? If not, do you really think he'll be a good steward of his future family?

7. Ask God to give you wisdom into his motives for doing things. Does he seem motivated to do what is right in order to avoid negative consequences or feedback, to manage his image, or to gain the admiration of others and acquire power? Or is he motivated by the glory of God?

8. Does he respect your boundaries? Or does he feel entitled to invade them and eradicate them from your life? This is a deal breaker, in my opinion. No respect now - no respect later.

6. How does he resolve conflict?

Does he say he's sorry when he hurts you or others? If he does, does a change in behavior follow? Or is he just saying sorry to get you off his back temporarily?

Does he make excuses for his behavior or shift the blame to you or someone else?

Does he want to get to the bottom of things and take responsibility for his part in a conflict, or does he prefer to minimize it and sweep it under the rug?

Is he good at taking responsibility for any outcomes of his personal choices?

Do you feel that after a conflict has occurred and been dealt with, that there is closure and a feeling of well being for both of you? Or do you feel confused and sick - and believe there are loose ends flapping in the breeze? This is a very bad sign. *Conflicts are good and should bring you closer—not make you guilt-ridden and bewildered.*

Other miscellaneous questions:

1. Do you feel you need to fix him (complete him or rescue him) - that he is helpless without you? Do you have to make excuses for him, and does he expect you to do so? If so, you could be headed toward a sick, co-dependent relationship that will bring you a lifetime of heart-ache. If a man isn't complete in Christ and ready to join with you - another complete person in Christ, then he isn't good marriage material.

2. What are his friends like? Do they have good reputations? Are they honest and kind and mature? What do they say about him?

3. Where are you at? Are you desperate to get married? Do you feel unworthy of a good man? Unworthy of love? If so, you may be an abuser magnet. Get personally healthy (this doesn't mean "get perfect.") You ARE worthy of love, and you ARE worth a good man. Don't settle for an abuser just to be able to say you belong to someone. You are not chattel. You are a treasure. You are a beloved child of the King. Raise your head, and don't accept anything less than a good (not perfect - but humble), honest, healthy man.

Addendum

This list was compiled from interviewing and talking at length with over a dozen women both locally and online who are in or have been in abusive relationships for many years. These are the things they would tell you if they could.

Nobody will have all of these traits. You may only observe a few. You want to look for *patterns* of behavior that are controlling or manipulative. *Trust your gut*. I was always told I was deceiving myself. Of course, that can happen too. But if your gut is telling you that something isn't quite right, give it more time and begin involving other objective people who will help you figure it out. Even then, the abuse may be so subtle that it is difficult to detect for a while. Pray. Ask God to give you wisdom.

For Further Study

More articles

- * [Living with a Chronically Self-Centered Spouse](#)
- * [The Emotionally Destructive Marriage](#)
- * [Emotional Abuse in the Church](#)
- * [16 Traits of a Healthy Marriage](#)
- * [The Fool Series](#)
- * The [Cry for Justice blog](#) – a treasure trove of help for women (and men!) in destructive relationships.

Recommended Resources

[The Emotionally Destructive Marriage](#) by Leslie Vernick

[Foolproofing Your Life: How to Deal Effectively with the Impossible People in Your Life](#) by Jan Silvious

[Boundaries](#) by Henry Cloud and John Townsend

[Changes that Heal](#) by Dr. Henry Cloud

[The Verbally Abusive Relationship: How to Recognize it and How to Respond](#) by Patricia Evans (secular resource)

[No More Christian Nice Girl: When Just Being Nice Instead of Good Hurts You, Your Family](#)

[and Your Friends](#) by Paul Coughlin and Jennifer D. Degler PhD

[Love is a Choice: The Definitive Book on Letting Go of Unhealthy Relationships](#) by Robert Hemfelt

[The Dance of Anger: A Woman's Guide to Changing the Patterns of Intimate Relationships](#) by Harriet Lerner (secular resource)

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