

When a friend won't walk away from abuse.



By Sarah LeTrent, CNN - Thursday, January 10, 2013

(CNN) -- As an argument between Gina and her boyfriend escalated in their New Jersey home more than 20 years ago, he started to become violent. Gina's friend Shawna, who'd come over to check on her, picked up the phone to call the police.

Soon, Gina's boyfriend redirected his fury.

"It's really important for her to make the decision to leave. He's controlling decision-making, so if you seem to control her decision as well, it's not good,"

- Katie Ray-Jones

It wasn't until he turned his attention from Gina and began beating Shawna with the phone that it clicked.

"It was such an eye opener to what he had been doing to me," Gina said.

Shawna's reaction was not to cower, as Gina had done in the past when her boyfriend flew off the handle. She fended off the violent man, and Gina helped her.

"I saw then that he wasn't this superhuman. Two pretty slight girls were able to subdue him," Gina said. (CNN is using only first names to protect the women's privacy.)

Shawna had told Gina time and again that her partner was abusive.

"I made all sorts of excuses for him: He was stressed, having a bad day, etc. Mostly I blamed myself for it," Gina said.

Inspired by Shawna's actions, Gina obtained a restraining order, and the police removed him from the home. Their nearly two-year relationship was over.

"I surrounded myself with friends, kept busy, but I didn't get a healthy mindset until years later," Gina said.

To an outsider's eye, the issue of domestic violence can be black and white: Just leave. For those left physically and emotionally black and blue, that zero-tolerance perspective isn't as clear, creating a disconnect between the abused and those who care for them.

When pop stars Chris Brown and Rihanna affectionately attended a Lakers game together on Christmas Day, many were left scratching -- or shaking -- their heads over the potentially rekindled romance.

Brown had been sentenced in August 2009 for felony assault on Rihanna, his then-girlfriend. He was required to serve probation, do 1,400 hours of community service and complete a 52-week domestic violence program.

Opinion: Rihanna making a bad decision?



Rihanna and Chris Brown attended an NBA game in Los Angeles on Christmas.

After their outing became public, CNN reader Daverelentless commented on the Marquee blog, "When he beats her up again (it's only a matter of time), I will not feel sorry for her. Only an idiot sticks their head in the Lion's mouth TWICE just to see if the Lion bites."

He wasn't alone in expressing anger and bewilderment over Rihanna's decision to welcome Brown back into her life. Witnesses to abusive relationships often ask: Why go back?

Katie Ray-Jones, president of the National Domestic Violence Hotline and the National Dating Abuse Helpline, says there are countless reasons a victim returns to or stays in an abusive

relationship: low self-worth, financial worries, fear of what the abuser would do if the abused left, even love.

Friends and family are often an integral part of the victim's way out. According to Ray-Jones, loved ones of the abused are the second most frequent callers to her organization's help line, behind the abused themselves.

"What can we do, because she doesn't want to leave?" they ask.

(Ray-Jones uses "she" and "her" because only 3% of the hot line's callers are male. But domestic violence affects men too: A 2010 CDC survey found that more than one in three women and more than one in four men had experienced violence by an intimate partner.)



One in three women and one in four men have experienced partner violence, according to a 2010 CDC survey.

Ray-Jones said an abused woman will leave a relationship approximately seven times before she leaves for good. The back and forth can frustrate friends and family.

If victims feel supported, they may grow stronger and more confident.

"It's really important for her to make the decision to leave. He's controlling decision-making, so if you seem to control her decision as well, it's not good," Ray-Jones said.

Being supportive doesn't mean telling the abused over and over that they should leave. Instead, offer a listening ear for when they're ready to open up.

"I really care about you; I'm your friend; I want to make sure you're OK; and I want to let you know I'm here for you," Ray-Jones suggested.

Ray-Jones also notes that if you think an abused person's life is at risk, you should be "very careful" about calling 911.

"If the police show up and they don't arrest him for whatever reason, that could be a really bad situation for her," Ray-Jones said. An alternative is to offer the victim a safe place to stay or a referral to a shelter.

Even if the victim doesn't listen the first or second or eighth time, it's important not to give up, Ray-Jones said. The mantra: "I respect your decision. Here are some tips to keep you safe."

If an abuse victim feels judged by a friend or family member, he or she could lose trust, withdraw and become skeptical of talking about the abuse to anyone else.

When Krystal's sister, Renee, left her second abusive relationship, she turned to her family, who had stuck by her and helped her move away from her first abuser.

During that year-long relationship, Renee often refused help but wouldn't get angry when the family offered, Krystal said.

"I have no doubt that she could have survived on her own; she's a strong woman. I think the most important thing was that we validated her feeling that things weren't right," Krystal said.

Renee managed to extricate herself from her first abusive relationship, and according to Krystal, her new boyfriend was "so nice and welcoming when I visited. He seemed really sweet to her most of the time."

Then, Renee's boyfriend kicked her out of the house with no money. She needed a place to stay, so she picked up the phone and called their father again for help.

"She didn't give many details, just that she was kicked out of the house. Slowly, other details started coming through, but I think it took her a while to really accept that she was in an abusive situation," Krystal said.

It wasn't until much later that she mentioned to Krystal that he had even, at one point, threatened her with a gun.

Renee never pressed charges or called the police. She still has to keep in contact with her abuser because they share custody of their children. Her family is still behind her, even with the knowledge that they can't fix everything.

"I felt absolutely helpless," Krystal said. "The survivor has to be the one to take action and make decisions. It's not easy to admit that you can't just come to the rescue for your little sister."