YVES SAINT LAURENT
BEAUTÉ

ABUSE IS NOT LOVE
2025 THOUGHT LEADERSHIP
WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE HER?
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Last Tuesday, I was sitting in a coffee shop, minding my own business, when two women slid into the seats beside me. Between sips of cappuccino, they dissected their friend's relationship—cataloguing what was "wrong" with the dynamic, how poorly their friend was handling it, and how differently they themselves would respond.

But they ignored or forgot that the story is bigger than the fact that he tells her who she can see, reads her texts, or humiliates her in public. The real story also acknowledges that she probably loves him. She's built a life around him. Her identity is entwined with his. That she may not yet see the warning signs of abuse—or if she does, she knows that leaving could be dangerous.

Often, we neglect how easy it is to sit on the sidelines of other people's relationships and shout, "Why doesn't she just leave?" or "What is she thinking?".

Like most complex situations, abuse is too often met with overly simplistic solutions from onlookers. But rather than offering judgment, perhaps it's time we ask a question: *What is it like to be her?* In her mind, the thoughts urging her to stay don't sound irrational. They sound like careful considerations, like love, like loyalty, like survival[1]:

- "At least I'm not alone."
- "I can fix it."
- "I've invested too much already."
- "I'm not perfect either."
- "It's my fault."
- "I can't financially afford to leave."
- "Leaving would disgrace my family."
- "I don't know what's right—or what's normal."
- "Every relationship has problems."
- "I need to try harder."
- "It will get better."
- "It's not all bad—he does really nice things for me."
- "What will people say?"
- "If he doesn't want to let me go, maybe I can't leave."

In this article, any lists that entail quotes are direct quotes accumulated from eight NGO's worldwide affiliated with the YSL Beauty's Abuse Is Not Love program.

Nearly one in three women globally will experience physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner or non-partner in their lifetime. These aren't just numbers, they're lived

realities etched into the bodies and psyches of women around the world. Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is not a private matter. It's a public health crisis, a human rights violation, and a global consequence of silence and passivity.

This is why initiatives like *Abuse is Not Love*, spearheaded by YSL Beauty, are so vital. Their impact-driven work provides education, awareness, and support for women worldwide. I've had access to invaluable interviews with their NGO partner across eight countries: USA, Germany, Indonesia, South Africa, Portugal, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Spain. These conversations have helped shape the five internal signs of abuse explored in this article.

While recognizing external abusive behaviors is crucial, learning to identify our internal experiences adds an essential layer of protection. These internal signs are ***confusion, minimization, disconnection, emotional unease, and embodied distress.***

My hope is that the following reflections serve as a resource, especially for those who have not yet had their pain named, seen, or validated.

Sign #1: Confusion

I remember one friend in particular: early 20s, bright, defiant, funny. She FaceTimed me late at night, crying about an argument with her boyfriend. I asked her, gently but directly, to turn on her camera. She hesitated. And then she did. She kept her gaze down, but I could see that her face was swollen and bruised. He had hit her.

And yet what stayed with me wasn't the injury, it was the confusion in her eyes. She wasn't saying "He hurt me." She was saying: **How could this have happened?** How could someone who says they love me… do this to me? How can this be the same person who buys me flowers and kisses my forehead? How is this my reality?

> "I'm confused.[2]"

I often hear bystanders' comment that abuse is "obvious." But as a therapist, I've learned the opposite: **abuse is a pandemic of confusion.** Love is clear. Love brings ease. Abuse scrambles our inner compass until we no longer know what is normal, who we are, or what to do.

In my interview with Tracy Vitchers[3], she said:

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[2] All quotes are taken directly from the interviews, reflecting the narratives of women survivors.
[3] Tracey E. Vitchers is an executive at a non-profit, It's on Us. She is also a nationally recognized expert on sexual violence prevention and survivor advocacy.

> "Relationship abuse often starts as small actions or behaviors intended to test the boundaries of the survivor that escalate over time, and typically result in a trigger event that includes violence. Following the violence, there can be a period of reconciliation between the abuser and the survivor in which the abuser apologizes or seeks forgiveness from the survivor. This cycle can be deeply confusing as the actions of the abuser don't match their words, or the survivor may be confused as to why they continue to care for someone who is currently harming or has previously harmed them."

Confusion can keep women in abusive dynamics. It's difficult to make decisions when we lack clarity and understanding, or when we are being asked to hold contradictions. It's scary to make decisions when we are unsure what is happening.

Sign #2: Minimization

In a session with clients, I've learned that when someone shows up annoyed or even outraged, I'm less worried. Anger, to me, shows a protective stance. It means they recognize an unmet need, a boundary violation or mistreatment.

But I get concerned when I hear statements such as:

- "It sounds worse than it was."
- "He only does it when he's drunk."
- "No one is perfect."
- "It's not like he hits me."

When someone downplays their pain, it's often because the truth feels unsafe. Language like this can be a quiet signal that something is off. If we find ourselves minimizing our emotions, dismissing our partner's behavior, or hiding parts of our experience, it's worth pausing to ask: *Why?*

We try to shrink our problems by shrinking the story, but when we shrink our stories, we often end up shrinking ourselves.

As a therapist I often get asked: Is it normal for him to check my location? Is it normal for him to read my texts? Is it normal to feel nervous when he comes home? Is it normal to always feel like I'm messing up? Is it normal to have this many ups and downs? Is it normal to be yelled at? Is it normal not to trust my own feelings? Is it normal to question my memory?

There is lack of a education in schools surrounding abuse, and as a result our perception of what's healthy is unfortunately shaped by what our friends go through, what we see in media or read in romance novels. Socially normalized abuse encourages us to dismiss and minimize our partner's abusive behaviors.

But just because something is common doesn't mean it's healthy.

Sign #3: Disconnection (self & others)

One of the most dangerous consequences of being in an abusive relationship is the slow erosion of the self. A woman might have once seen herself as confident, articulate, grounded. But now she hesitates before she speaks. She second-guesses her feelings. She looks in the mirror and no longer recognizes the person staring back.

- "I don't feel like myself"
- "I'm not normal."
- "I don't know who I am anymore."
- "I'm not enough."
- "I can't trust my feelings."

Over time, survivors are likely to encounter a diminished sense of identity, finding it challenging to recognize themselves or define who they are beyond the context of their experiences. They start to self-identify as powerless, broken, stupid, useless, invisible. These labels are often a result of ongoing manipulation and gaslighting.

But the disconnection doesn't stop at the self. It begins to spill outward. Many survivors gradually withdraw from the people who love them. Texting back feels exhausting. Family gatherings become performative. And trying to explain what's happening often feels tangled, confusing, and overwhelming.

During our interview, Tracy Vitchers explained:

> "Many of the young women survivors we work with are seen by their friends and family as strong, smart, empowered, and/or independent, but then their abuser's violence can deteriorate or throw their self-worth into question. Personal anxiety over this perceived disconnect can cause them to isolate themselves from friends and family to avoid shame or being "found out," which further exacerbates their dependence on their abuser and can escalate violence."

When a survivor feels disconnected from herself and others, she is more likely to be malleable, adaptable, and silenced. It's why it's a dangerous step in an abusive dynamic.

Sign #4: Emotional Unease

Whenever I speak at workshops or events about relationships, I often ask: "How does your relationship make you feel?" And I'm not asking about how it occasionally makes them feel, but *often*. What emotion lingers or frequently shows up?

Emotions are messengers. In abusive dynamics, often marked by highs and lows, paying attention to emotional patterns can be illuminating.

If every survivor wrote down the dominant feeling they experienced in their relationship, many would list fear, anxiety, guilt, dread, shame, humiliation, or hopelessness.

Daniel Cotrim, a director at a non-profit organization APAV Sede in Portugal, reflected on the emotional state of survivors:

> "Anxiety often took center stage, manifesting in persistent feelings of dread or worry about how the other person would react. Guilt and shame frequently intertwined, as survivors wrestled with the belief that they were somehow to blame for the struggles in the relationship, or that they were inherently flawed. Fear, too, loomed large—whether of confrontation, abandonment, or escalation into something worse. For many, numbness became a coping mechanism, a way to survive the emotional overload by shutting down and disconnecting from their own feelings."

A common thread in my interviews about survivors is the way they describe their time with their partner: "living through hell" or "walking on eggshells." It's important to remember that healthy relationships don't leave us feeling this way. They offer safety, support, and space to grow into our most authentic selves. When we pay attention to the emotions a relationship evokes, we begin to understand its true nature.

Sign #5: (Embodied) Distress

Our emotions and thoughts may sound the alarm, but so can our body. As evident by most of my interviews, it's clear that abuse doesn't only affect how a woman feels emotionally, her body often protests, quietly but persistently.

> "I began to suffer from permanent insomnia. My stomach would turn every time I came home from work and reached the doorstep. My workplace felt like a safe haven. Even the sound of my phone ringing made me nauseous. I lost my appetite and dropped nearly 10 kilograms."

These are not isolated experiences. It became clear in my interviews that beyond the visible injuries like bruises, abrasions, or infections, survivors often report somatic complaints. These include chronic headaches, back or muscle pain, digestive issues like IBS, as well as stress-related symptoms such as tightness in the chest, insomnia, chronic fatigue, heart palpitations, teeth grinding, difficulty concentrating, and a weakened immune system.

Just like our emotions, our body is a messenger. While all symptoms should be assessed by a medical professional, it's also essential to listen to what our body might be trying to say: *something isn't right*. It's trying to protect us.

Abuse is rarely a single event or a single decision. Leaving is not a matter of willpower or simply "knowing better." Interviews across multiple countries reveal that, on average, it can take five to twelve attempts before someone is able to leave an abusive relationship.

Each return is not failure, it is survival, an attempt to navigate love, danger, loyalty, and the tangled threads of identity and hope. Recognizing the internal signs of abuse—the confusion, minimization, disconnection, emotional atmosphere, and embodied distress—is not about placing blame, but about creating clarity, safety, and understanding.

By paying attention, by asking *"What is it like to be her?"* instead of offering judgment, we can begin to move beyond simplistic solutions. We can see survivors not as passive victims, but as complex, courageous human beings negotiating impossible circumstances. And in doing so, we can start to build a culture that supports them, validates their experiences, and provides the space, resources, and compassion necessary for true escape, healing, and reclaiming of self.