

The Abusive Woman

© 1997/2020 Nancy Davis, Ph.D.

Of course, like all other individuals, abusive women are not all the same, and will differ in their characteristics and how they interact with different family members or others with whom they interact. Nevertheless, over the years in my private practice and research in this area, I have observed that abusive women often exhibit the following character traits and behaviors.

Generally, they:

- Are very good at fooling people initially.
- Attract men into the relationship in the same way abusive and sadistic men attract women as victims -- by being extremely nice in the courtship phase and building up the person's self-esteem. This type of woman often picks a nice and nurturing man who likes to take care of people (e.g. social workers, ministers and even police officers), and who is also a problem solver. She also picks a man who does not like confrontation or anger, perhaps because he was emotionally abused as a child or was taught that anger is wrong. In the beginning of the relationship, she rarely shows anger, seems to love sex, and lets him be in control. The woman may show glimpses of her true personality, but the man says to himself, "That's not the real her". Once she feels that she has his love, she begins to switch from positive to negative -- putting down her husband/partner and degrading him, being displeased with him and blaming him for every wrong she images she has suffered. He keeps trying to "solve the problem" by changing and doing what she wants. What he does not realize, because he is a problem-solver, is that she doesn't really want the problem to be solved. She keeps changing what she wants to keep him off balance. An example from a patient, "Before we were married, she was so wonderful. Mary always brought me meals at work with sweet little notes in them. I thought I had died and gone to heaven. The day we got married was the last day she ever cooked a thing for me."
- Lack boundaries into what is appropriate behavior. Appropriate behavior does not apply to them. May call a therapist, teacher or husband's boss with her opinions, believing her opinion is superior to anyone else's. Interrupts conversations.
- Constantly brings up problems, but often answers "Yes, but" when given solutions to these problems. They are not looking for solutions, they like to complain and draw attention to themselves.
- Nothing is ever her fault. She may initially seem like a victim to others who do not know her well, in that she convincingly blames others. However, after getting to know her and others in her life, it is apparent that she refuses to take any responsibility for her problems.
- Possesses an incredible memory for details, especially how others have allegedly wronged her. Rarely forgets a mistake that others make and constantly bring these mistakes up, even years later. Use her memory of their mistakes to degrade others in her life.
- Rarely compliments anyone. Rather, she spends a great deal of time telling others how they have disappointed her or describing these events to others.

- Lies and believes her own lies. Her downfall is often her belief that her opinion and perceptions are the "correct" ones and that everyone else will see things "her" way.
- Often tells completely different lies about the same incident to two people that she should have realized may well talk to each other. Has problems predicting the responses of others to her behavior. When others get furious with her has limited understanding of her role in creating this rage.
- Is emotionally about three years old and generally can be predicted to act this age. This means she is extremely narcissistic and self-centered and generally lacks empathy for the feelings of others.
- Believes she is perfect and others aren't but should be.
- Rarely can maintain close friendships with other women except for family members. Have superficial, short-term intense relationships. Often her husband is her only close social relationship and she spends all her time with him, except when with family members
- If her marriage or relationship does not last, seems able to convince the men she dates after the divorce that their last husband misunderstood her or was a monster.
- See things in black or white, right or wrong, with no grey or middle areas. Sees others as either perfect or totally flawed. Usually start out believing someone is great and treating them as if they are gods. Then something happens in the relationship; she then switches to believing this person is evil and turns against him or her.
- Generally have poor job histories and trouble keeping jobs. May switch from important job to important job. Often presents very well during job interviews, saying all the right things. However, many can't maintain this type of appropriate behavior for long, so she is often fired or quits after working a short time. Of course, she maintains this wasn't her fault. If she has a professional degree, may work out of her home. If she works in a group or team setting, may bully others at work to get her way.
- Are often dependent on their own mothers, even as adults. May call her mother several times a day, yet may complain to others that she is abusive, "a bitch" or treats her badly.
- Have a massive rage that may not be evident all the time. When this rage surfaces it is of incredible intensity. Can switch moods in an instant, often going from smiling to rage and back to smiling as if they have an "emotional switch" that they can turn on and off in a way that seems unnatural.
- Are vindictive. They rarely give up in attacking someone they dislike or perceive has wronged them. Keep coming back again and again in furious attacks when other people would have let the anger go. Because she rarely gives up, her husband/boyfriend or significant other (and often those who work with her) learns to give her what she wants because they realize that she will not give up until she gets it.
- Often crave status, i.e., being associated with "important" people like movie stars, sports figures or politicians. May have furs, jewelry, expensive "in" things that make her superficially seem important and successful.

- Often writes volumes of notes, diaries or letters, sometimes sharing them with family members to let them know how disappointed she is in their behavior.
- Have a sense of entitlement. Justifies her behavior no matter how outrageous or hurtful it is to someone else. Nothing is ever her fault. Little or no guilt or self-awareness.
- Love to turn people against each other. For example, will create tension by informing one person that another has said something negative about them, which may be a total lie or a distortion of what was said. This is followed by going to the person who was quoted and informing that person that the other person said negative things about them. Often these negative revelations are given only with the promise that this cannot be repeated or is a secret. She does this to create problems in the relationship between those two people. Likes to say, "Do you want to hear what ... said about you?" Seems to have little appreciation that these two people might compare notes and discover the distortions in what she has repeated.
- Loves chaos. If there aren't problems and upheaval around her, she seems obsessed and delighted at creating them.
- Women with this disorder often use sex to "snare" men, but do not seem to really enjoy sex except to manipulate men. Often pretends to like sex to get a man to marry her; however, seems to quickly lose interest in sex after she is sure that she has the man. May use sex to have babies and then neglect the husband. May treat her husband as a slave.
- May hit, scratch, or throw things at her husband, who rarely tells anyone that this is happening because he is embarrassed. Often spends a great deal of time degrading her husband and tearing down his self esteem, at the same time making him feel responsible for pleasing her, although this is practically impossible. When she senses that she has pushed her husband/boyfriend/significant other too far and he may leave, she switches behaviors and becomes nice and loving long enough to keep him from leaving her. Once she senses that her husband believes she has changed, she returns to abusive behavior. Men married to this type of woman may detail the abuses he endures, but then say, "But, I love her".
- Are virtually impossible to please for any significant period because she keeps changing the boundaries of what she wants. For example, a secretary was allowed to design her own desk. When it was delivered, she complained that it was the wrong size, height, etc. When her boss pointed out that she had designed it, her reply was that the boss should have told her that she was designing it incorrectly, i.e. it wasn't her fault.
- Often have problems honoring body space or personal space.
- May distort the thinking of her husband to the point that he believes what she tells him to believe, such as "I am a good mother." Getting him to believe these distortions is helped by her tendency to isolate him from friends and family by her constant complaints that he should spend all of his time with her as a way of controlling him. Complains about his friends and family until he gives them up or rarely sees them.
- These women rarely improve in therapy because they do not believe that there is anything wrong with them...it's everyone else who is wrong. Most do not even believe that they need therapy -- are not in pain but cause pain to those around them. May refer friends

and relative to therapists or take her children or foster children to therapy. The focus of her conversations in therapy is to demonstrate to the therapist that she is a victim and how others have wronged her or to simply gain attention. Generally, refuses to work on their own problems or to acknowledge that she even has problems. Wants her therapist to believe her "victim" story and take her side against others. She can be very convincing and believable, at least initially until the therapist begins to see inconsistencies or patterns that raise questions about her credibility or perceptions. Often leaves therapy when the therapist is confrontational in saying that she has a role in the problem or presents the side of someone else in her family. If she is invited in at the beginning of her child's therapy session, may try to use the whole session for herself, without any thought of her child needing to be the one in therapy session. She usually uses the therapy session to complain about others, not to gain insight into her issues or behavior.