

# ASU Web Devil

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## Controlling Love: Women Throughout the World and at ASU Cope with Physically and Emotionally Abusive Relationships

By Erika Wurst

It was her freshman year at ASU when Becky met John. They were best friends for a while before attraction set in and the two began dating.

It seemed like the relationship would be perfect. But as soon as the words “boyfriend” and “girlfriend” came into the mix, John’s behavior changed completely and the relationship turned from loving to abusive.

The fact is, nearly one third of American women claim they have been physically or sexually abused by a husband or boyfriend at some point in their lives.

While many think domestic violence is exclusive to older couples, Christina Walsh, of the National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence, says age is not a factor when it comes to physically and emotionally abusive relationships.

“There’s no difference if you’re married or older or in a college setting. The emotional and verbal abuse is about power and control. It doesn’t matter what the age,” Walsh says. “It happens in all intimate relationships.”

Walsh says abuse can happen to men, women, heterosexuals and homosexuals. And, it’s a problem that is happening right here on campus.

When Becky met John as a freshman at ASU, she was excited.

“We were best friends, we were,” says Becky, 21, whose name has been changed to protect her identity. “We always got along. We never fought.”

After being friends for several months, the two started dating. Soon after, John, whose name has also been changed, became jealous and then emotionally abusive.

“After a month of dating, he didn’t trust me,” she says. “He had no reason not to trust me. I was Ms. Angel.”

Becky says she had to change her behavior to suit John.

“I stopped talking to guys, period,” she says.

But that wasn't good enough. John started looking through her cell phone, tracking her calls, dictating to whom she talked and when.

“Even when we would stop by a friend's house, I would have to sit in the car,” Becky says. “I wasn't allowed inside.”

But Becky says she didn't recognize John's behavior as warning signs of what was to come.

“It didn't click with me. All I wanted to do was make him happy,” she says. “He was all I cared about and I wasn't going to do anything for him to be mad at me. I never thought anything of it. It was just, like, that's how it was.

“I didn't realize that it was the beginning of fucking craziness.”

### **Unaware**

Kathleen Ferraro, a sociology professor at Northern Arizona University who wrote her dissertation on battered women and the shelter movement, has been working with abused women for decades.

She says that often the warning signs of abusive relationships are there, but that most people in the early stages of a relationship tend to emphasize the positive aspects of their partners, causing them to override the messages that something's just not right.

“The thing is, people who are physically assaulted readily identify the relationship as abusive,” Ferraro says.

She says emotional abuse can be harder for victims to identify, but just as devastating. Women have been socialized to think that they should be second to a man, and they often view a partner's controlling behavior as a sign of love.

But it's not.

Becky agrees.

“He never made me feel bad about myself,” she says. “At that point, I thought it was because he loved me so much that he was intimidated for others to come talk to me. I thought it was cool, like, ‘Wow, someone cares that much.’ It was kind of flattering because I was in that mindset.”

Becky didn't know that John's controlling behavior such as looking through her phone, not letting her talk to men and placing constant blame on her for their problems is often a warning sign of an abusive relationship.

Walsh says those who do the abusing feel the need for power or control. They want to be able to dictate their partner's every move and the victim usually succumbs.

Eventually, Becky had to change as a person completely. Once a social butterfly, she hesitated before even looking at a stranger for too long in fear that she would upset John.

"I had to be so careful around him because I didn't want to make a mistake," she says. "I should have realized, but you don't while it's happening. You're so into keeping him, that it doesn't matter. I cared that he was happy and I was with him and that was it."

Becky says she began to think he was all she had.

Other signs of an abusive relationship can include one partner calling the other embarrassing or bad names, acting in ways that scare the other, tries to control where the other one goes, beginning to slap, shove or hit the other, or acting like the abuse is the victim's fault.

For Becky, the warning signs were there, but the courage to leave wasn't.

Katie, Becky's longtime friend and roommate identified John's controlling behavior from the start and soon began to notice a change in her friend's behavior.

"She was really absorbed with him. She would cater to him around the clock, every day, all day long. If she didn't, they would fight and fight and she'd do anything to get him back," Katie says.

"He was very hot and cold all the time," she says. "You didn't know whether he'd flip out or start laughing. You had to hold your breath, and it got progressively worse as the relationship went on."

### **Physical**

One evening, Katie, John and Becky were hanging out on the patio of the girls' apartment when they heard something fall in the storage closet. The noise startled them, but neither girl could have anticipated how John would react.

Becky says John said, "There's a dude in there. You're hiding someone."

She says, "He flipped out."

Katie says John had become so insecure about another guy being in Becky's life that he would come up with any reason to yell.

Jealousy is a major factor in many abusive relationships. The victim slowly becomes the abuser's property and even the most innocent exchanges with a potential suitor will cause the abuser to act out in a jealous rage. He will often make up ridiculous worst-case scenarios, such as John's assumption that Becky smuggled a man into her storage closet.

“One time he looked me straight in the face and said, ‘I’m not afraid to hurt you, and if I do, it will be your fault, not mine,’” Becky says. “I’m, like, ‘I cannot believe he just said that; he doesn’t mean that.’ But I still wanted to be with him.”

Becky would sit there, trying to figure out how it could be her fault, but was convinced it was.

And while John never did cross the barrier and become physically abusive with Becky, the emotional abuse continued.

Others haven’t been as fortunate.

Ferraro says that often physically and emotionally abusive relationships come as a packaged deal.

According to a survey by the U.S. Department of Justice, violence inflicted by an intimate partner accounts for about 21 percent of violent crime experienced by women. It estimates that one in five female high school students reports being physically or sexually abused by a dating partner.

In 2000, Arizona was second in the nation for its rate of women murdered by men. And while physical violence is a huge problem, Ferraro says that emotionally abusive relationships are just as prevalent and just as hard to survive.

Becky says she found herself sitting at home every night. It was easier for her to just sit alone than have to explain where she went or what she was doing.

“He was allowed to go out with his guy friends, and I wasn’t allowed to question it. It was perfectly fine with me,” she says. “He’d call me from parties, and I’d be sitting at home alone because I was too scared to leave.

“I really thought that if I just made one wrong move, he’d break up with me. I never wanted that to happen.”

### **Breaking up**

It’s easy to look at abusive relationships as an outsider and see the dysfunction.

Katie had to watch Becky deal with John day in and day out. She says it was just shocking to see somebody put up with someone like John – to see Becky never sticking up for herself.

“He would storm out and say the most horrible things. Then he’d call back, apologize and end up spending the night,” Katie says. “It was annoying and frustrating. I wanted to jump in and yell at him, but it wasn’t my place.”

When summer came, John went back home to the East Coast, but still kept tight reign on his girlfriend.

He would call 10 times a day, Becky says, accusing her of having people over. When all of her friends came back to Arizona from colleges across the country, Becky didn't visit them once. She was afraid he'd call and she'd be out somewhere. Even something as simple as going to the mall with her girlfriends became off limits.

"I was like his car," Becky says. "He could take me wherever he wanted and I had no say. He would just drive me around. His whole thing was control."

Finally, Becky got fed up with the questioning, lack of trust and being treated like property. She stood up for herself in one small act for the first time after nearly a year of being with John.

Realizing that all of their conversations consisted of her explaining to John that she loved him and wasn't cheating on him, Becky did the unthinkable.

She hung up the phone on him. Minutes later, she called back, but it was too late. John told her that he was her boyfriend and was the one person who was allowed to ask her any question and have it immediately answered.

"He said that it was over and that nobody hangs up on him. We didn't talk, that was it," Becky says. "I would sit by the phone and call him, but he wouldn't answer. He dropped me."

### **Back together**

But that wasn't the end, as it rarely is in abusive relationships.

Ferraro says that because people place such a high value on intimate relationships in American culture, they try harder to make relationships work. Both men and women are reluctant to identify a negative relationship as unworkable or that an abusive partner can be so manipulating that the victim will begin to think the negative aspects of the relationship are his or her own fault.

"They'll think, 'Maybe this is who I'm supposed to be with and I need to make changes,'" Ferraro says. "It's pretty hard. I've never met anyone who got out of a relationship the first time violence happened."

A survey conducted earlier this year by KRC Research in conjunction with a domestic violence campaign by The Body Shop and the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence shows that 39 percent of the women surveyed would leave an abusive partner at the first sign of abuse. But the truth is, according to the survey, that women are abused physically an average of five to seven times before actually calling it quits.

Why is it so hard to leave? Walsh says abusers often isolate their victims from friends and family so they are in complete control.

“They will say, ‘You can’t do this, you can’t do that. Nobody loves you but me,’” she says. “If you don’t have the opportunity for outside input, that’s all you know. It supercedes everything you’ve learned, and there are no opportunities for rays of light to get through the dark.”

Katie says Becky truly believed that John was everything. Even though she would constantly tell her friend that John wasn’t worth it, Becky continued to believe that if she didn’t have him, her world was over.

And for a while, it was. Becky was miserable without John. She moved home from school, took a semester off, lost nearly 20 pounds and started taking medication for the depression that set in immediately following her break-up.

“I had my mind set that he was the only one I wanted to be with,” Becky says. “He blamed our break-up on me. All the blame was on me like I did something wrong. I had that lingering. What could I have done differently? Even though he made me that sick and I couldn’t believe somebody could make me this way, I still wanted to be with him.”

Then, six months after not talking to John, Becky moved back to Tempe to start a new semester at ASU and the phone rang.

It was John, and like many women in abusive relationships do, she raced back.

### **Support**

Studies show that the process of leaving an abusive partner consists of several steps. The first is when the victim becomes less tolerant of his or her abuser. Becky had reached this point, but she still wasn’t ready to leave.

“I knew I got fed up with him. It pissed me off the stuff he did,” she says. “But I just wanted to take care of him and make sure he was happy. I stopped caring about myself.”

The next step in the process of recovery often comes when the victim reaches a personal turning point after a confrontation or conversation with an abuser. For Becky, this didn’t come long after the two began speaking again.

After she ran into John on campus one day, Becky accepted his offer for a ride home. He was with a guy friend and when the three of them got into the car, Becky turned to the back seat to introduce herself.

“The kid got out of the car and he [John] starts blasting me for talking to him,” Becky recalls. “He said that this was it and he couldn’t deal with me anymore. He was going to drop me off and never talk to me again.”

Becky says she refused to get out of the car until John would talk to her like she was a human being. He became so fed up that he walked over to the passenger door, picked her up, pushed her out and never spoke to her again. That was a year ago this week.

“That was when I totally turned the corner,” Becky says. “That was the moment I felt like I could finally be done with it.”

After breaking up, victims of abuse are encouraged to find new social involvements and avenues of support. Being in college and in a social environment made it easy for Becky to find support from friends.

Laura Jesmer, a licensed clinical social worker at ASU’s Counseling and Consultation, says that she sees many students with relationship abuse issues, but at the same time, there are many students who could benefit from the center’s service, but don’t go.

After a victim becomes isolated by his or her abuser, having outside support can be key to recovery, but the shame that often surrounds victims of abuse will hinder them from seeking help.

The KRC Research survey showed that 34 percent of the women interviewed said they’d be too embarrassed to tell family or friends about having been abused. Walsh has several suggestions for a person who suspects that someone they know is being abused physically or emotionally by a partner.

Walsh says the first thing a friend needs to do is get educated and know what’s available in case the victim comes to them looking for an out.

Second, Walsh says that pushing the victim to leave by saying, “You have to leave,” or “He’s horrible” will get no results. Instead, those looking to support victims should say, “I’m worried for your safety. I’m here to support you and you don’t deserve this.”

“It takes victims lots and lots of time to come forward, and they need to work it through in their head that there’s no reason to be ashamed,” Walsh says. “Very often, all they hear from their abuser is that they’re crazy. If that’s what he’s been telling you, you might think that you are, and you’re not going to talk to anyone because you’re ‘crazy,’ right?”

Finally, and most importantly, Walsh says it is important to believe a victim’s story. She says it is especially hard for men who have been victims to come forward because there is an added stigma. Men are supposed to be strong, she says, and there is something wrong with a man if he is being abused.

The truth is, there is just as much support for male victims as there is for female victims of abuse. Walsh says it’s a myth that most domestic violence programs exist only for women. If a center receives any local, state or government funding, it must work with victims of both sexes.

Often gay and lesbian victims are hesitant to get help, as well. Ferraro says that those who are not openly gay will worry about being outed if they report abuse, and in some cases, the abuser will use this as an additional threat in the relationship.

## **Getting over it**

“I didn’t consider it an abusive relationship then. Never in a billion years would I sit and say ‘I’m in an emotionally abusive relationship.’” Becky says. “But then I started seeing so much on the news about how abusive relationships can also be mental. I almost wish it was physical, because this gets in your head and changes you completely as a person. Someone that I loved was turning me into something I wasn’t and I thought he was doing it because he loved me. Even after counseling, I still went back.”

Looking back, Becky says she realizes what she should have done. She should have put her foot down in the beginning or realized what he was doing sooner, but it was impossible to see these things while she was in the relationship. When loved ones would approach her about her unhealthy relationship, Becky says she would think about it for five minutes and then it would pass.

“It was almost like I didn’t have time to realize it because I was in the midst of dealing with him and his problems,” she says.

Now, back in school and moving on with her life, Becky is grateful for all of the support she received from friends.

“To come back and have friends to make me feel like a human being again was the most important part,” she says. “I ditched everyone for him. They all told me 100 times that I didn’t need him, but you can’t overcome it until you realize there’s a problem for yourself. I’m the one who had to realize it before I could fix it.”

Becky says there is hope out there for people in emotionally or physically abusive relationships.

“If I can get over it, trust me – anyone can.”

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