

‘The journey from surviving to survivor has been less lonely with a partner in mental health’

Couples counselling seemed like the best path if I wanted to save my marriage. And I did want to save my marriage, although it was not exactly clear how.

I met my husband while we were in college and dated him for almost a year before he strangled me one evening, on my birthday. Until that moment, everything I knew of him was goodness: a sweet, curious, quiet but outgoing man who loved me almost instantly. I'd never been loved so deeply, so quickly before. And this love felt incredible. Exactly what I'd wanted for as long as I could want romance. And now this violent moment - to me, an anomaly. It was easy to tell myself, this isn't the real him; this is just a mistake. A brief lapse in otherwise excellent judgment. And so I stayed with him, as did the violence, for almost two years.

He hit me, bit me, tried to push me out of a moving car. And I stayed with him, resolutely, believing I could fix this.

But I knew that we needed help to fix it - that I needed help. I'd decided his behaviour was both unacceptable and not my fault, but I wasn't ready to give up on him.

When we walked into the marriage counsellor's office, I was full of hope. The counsellor asked me to describe what was happening in our marriage, and I told him everything - the fighting, the abuse, the strangling, everything. For the first time, I told someone outside of our marriage about the violence, and saying it out loud made it a blunt reality.

Then my husband chimed in with his take. 'Yes, I hit her,' he said. 'But it's not abuse. We're just having some issues.'

Sitting, legs crossed, on a leather sofa chair in front of us, his wood-panelled office lined with books, the marriage counsellor started scribbling notes. After my husband finished explaining his side, the counsellor looked down and breathed a heavy sigh. Then he looked up at us, frowning.

'I think you two need to take a break,' he began. 'Hitting is not OK. And that lets me know you need time apart to figure things out.' I felt hopeful. 'But,' he continued, turning to look only at me. 'While you're taking time apart, you need to figure out ways to get him not to hit you.'

I was stunned. 'Something you're doing is causing him to react this way toward you,' he continued. 'I'm not sure what it is, but you've got to figure that out. I can work with you both, separately and as a union.'

Over the next 30 minutes, the resounding theme of our counselling session was that I was at fault, and therefore in

control. That I could control whether he hit me. But that is not the nature of abuse. Abuse is not an action/reaction dynamic. Abuse is a choice that an abuser makes.

But I did not learn that from the marriage counsellor. I learned that from the therapist at the domestic violence shelter I went to once I'd left my husband. The marriage counsellor was focused on saving the marriage, as opposed to saving me. And I was done with therapy after that; I resolved never to trust a counsellor again. Until I met her, the woman who would tell me that the abuse was not my fault, saving myself is a rightful option, and it is OK to leave. And, as her client, I stayed gone from my marriage forever.

Therapy saved my life, but more specifically, trauma-informed therapy saved my life. After I left domestic violence services, I made regular therapy a part of my wellbeing journey. Even today, I'm still unearthing things in therapy - how to date again, why my deep fear of flying is a trauma response and what healing looks like. The journey from surviving to survivor has been less lonely with a partner in mental health.

However, trusting therapists took time. I withheld a lot from my current therapist at first. I'd say I was doing great when I was angry at a loved one. I'd say I felt happy when I knew depression was getting close to my mind's door again.

Now that we have trust and a rhythm, therapy is a lifeguard. I talk to my therapist about random things - why can't I stop eating whole pizzas? And serious things - will I feel lonely forever? Therapy, for me, is a constant renegotiation between my body and heart about what my psyche can bear. About what brings me pleasure and what causes intense anxieties. How to react when people are hurtful and how to seek mercy when I've hurt others.

For instance, it took a therapist I worked with when I was well past the age of 30 to help me understand what I now know - not only are boundaries essential, boundaries are *freedom*. When you set a boundary, you are saying, 'We are free to engage, explore and create right here, within these lines.' A boundary is an invitation to continue in a relationship with someone, just on terms that are healthy for you.

And that has been the crux of my therapy journey as a relationship abuse survivor: learning what is healthy for me and designing a life around that. Inviting people in and escorting people out. But handling every heart, including *my own*, with the care and compassion that we all deserve. ■



About the author

Beverly Gooden is a writer, artist and social activist known for her groundbreaking hashtag movement #WhyIStayed. She earned a master's degree in social justice from Loyola University Chicago, US. Her debut memoir, *Surviving: why we stay and how we leave abusive relationships*, published in the UK by Sheldon Press, is out now. www.beverlygooden.com

