

The Abusive Woman

© 1997 By Nancy Davis, Ph.D.

- Are very good at fooling people initially.
- Attract men into the relationship in the same way abusive and sadistic men attract women by being very nice in the courtship phase, and building up his self-esteem. This type of woman often picks a very nice and nurturing man who likes to take care of people, i.e., police officers, ministers, and is 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. They show glimpses of their 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 and degrading him, being displeased with him and blaming him for every wrong she imagines 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 want the problem solved. She keeps changing what she wants to keep him off balance. "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 bring up problems, but answer "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 blames others. However, after getting to know her, it is apparent that she refuses to take responsibility for problems in her life.
- Possess an incredible memory for details, especially how others have wronged them. Rarely forget a mistake that others make and constantly bring these mistakes up, even years later. Use her memory of 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.

- 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 tell completely different lies about the same incident to two people that she should have known might 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. May have her husband as her only close friend and spends all of her time with him, except when with family members. If their marriage does not last, seem 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. See 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, so she switches this person to 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 present very well during job interviews, saying all the right things. However, many can't maintain this type of appropriate behavior for very long so they are often fired or quit after working a short time. Of course, she says this wasn't her fault. If she has a professional degree, may work out of her home or 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.
- Has 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 a feeling "switch" that they can turn on and off in a way that seems unnatural.

- **Are vindictive.** Like sharks, they rarely give up in attacking someone they hate. 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 (and often those who work with her) learns to give her what she wants because he realizes 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.
- Often write volumes of notes, diaries or letters, sometimes giving them to 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 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 belief that these two people might compare notes and discover the distortions in what she has repeated, because they rarely do.
- 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 like 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 impossible. When she senses that she has pushed her husband too far and he may leave, she switches behaviors and becomes nice and loving 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 impossible to please 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 give pain to those around them. May refer friends and relative to therapists or take her children or foster children to therapy. However, therapy is used to demonstrate that she is a victim or how others have wronged her or to gain attention. Generally refuses to work on their own problems or usually to acknowledge that they even have problems. Wants her therapist to believe her victim story and take her side against others and can be very believable. Leaves therapy when the therapist is confrontational in saying that she has a role in the problem or takes 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 look at herself.

How the Abusive Woman Impacts her Children:

- Children grow up without the understanding that that other mothers are different from theirs. They may never gain insight into the role their mother has played in their own functioning, unless someone helps them to understand. Because abusive women believe that nothing is ever their fault, and because they are almost impossible to please because they continually change the definition of what it takes to please them, their children grow up with a sense of continually being defeated. It is natural for a child to try to please their mother; however, with this type mother, the children learn

to give up...what's the use, she will never change. They then generalize this idea to many parts of life.

- Although abusive women may encourage their children and husbands, this is generally in areas which would make her look good if they excelled (going to college, winning a beauty contest, being a cheer leader). She often makes negative comments to her children, but many children who grew up with this type of mother say that their mother never gave them a compliment. Many adults who grew up with an abusive mother are unaware of this lack of positive comments, until asked, "What kinds of compliments did your mother give you?" If she gives them a compliment, it is usually accompanied by a negative, put-down or is given in front of others, to impress them. For example, "You are so intelligent so why can't you make straight A's? You are acting stupid and there is no excuse for it because you are smart. You have a beautiful face if you just weren't so fat, others could see it. "

- Many children with abusive mothers grow up constantly saying, "I'm sorry", for even the slightest mistake. They were blamed for so many things that they become afraid of making any mistakes and misinterpret the normal ups and downs of behaviors as mistakes. (Like cutting something in the kitchen too thin when helping someone cook or accidentally spilling some water on the table). They may constantly try to read others to see if their behavior is approved, because that is how they tried to survive their abusive mother. In adult life, abusers use their constant apologizing and their problems with confrontation to target them.

- Abusive women and other narcissistic and self-centered women and men, do not seem to find joy in giving to others. In other words, many people love to give gifts to others, because the receiver shows such appreciation that the giver finds their joy rewarding. Many children of abusive women indicate that their mother expected something in return when she did something for them. As adults, children who grew up with these mothers may not understand when someone gives them a gift just for the joy in watching them receive it. They feel uncomfortable and may say, "I don't need that" or believe something is expected in return and feel uncomfortable because they are not clear in what it is.

- Fuse with their female children, sometimes with their sons (can't tell where the child ends and they begin-doesn't want her children to grow up and be independent). When the children are young, may seem like a good mother. However, when these children reach adolescence where rebellion and independence are natural, uses every technique imaginable to keep the child dependent. Interestingly, she often is most abusive to the rebellious child, because the compliant child does everything she wants. Just as many abusive men hate women, the abusive woman almost always hates men. She uses them and manipulates them and often wants their attention and approval.

However, because she hates men, her sons can become a problem to her when they grow beyond the cute stage. If a divorce takes place, may want to keep her daughters and give the x-husbands the sons.

- Likes others to believe she is a great mother, so may volunteer to work in her child's classroom or PTA, talk loudly to her child at the grocery store "When we get home we are going to read two stories. How many books have we read in the past two weeks?" May dress her children in stylish clothes or put them in multiple after school classes or sports so that she can look good.

- Although the father of her children is often kind and unabusive to them, he rarely protects them from the abusive statements and behavior of their mother. The role of a parent is to protect their children from abuse and harm and to make them feel safe. Although the father may empathize with the child, he plays the role of a sibling who is also being abused. He may work long hours to avoid her, leaving the children with the abusive mother for long periods. He may be unaware of the extent of the abuse, although he is aware that she is abusive because she abuses him. This distorts the child's perception of both a mother and a father and has far reaching consequences.

- Although they convince their mate they are good mothers, these women are very self-centered and always puts herself in front of her children. In very extreme cases, she may kill her children to keep her husband from having them during a divorce.

- In these families, the child may be blamed for the mother's temper tantrums, or irrational behavior. "Don't get your mother started", the child is warned. When the mother gets out of control, the family says, "See what you did" to the child, who then takes responsibility for the mother's behavior. She may blame the child for everything..."It's your fault I got breast cancer; you have kept me so upset because you are such an awful child that if I die, it's your fault." Accepting responsibility for things they do not control or did not do, often extends into adult functioning and leads to a lifetime of guilt.

- Tend to be the most abusive to children who are rebellious and who refuse to be compliant and obedient. Although they seem to hate this child and blame this child for any and every wrong in their life, do not want her/him to move away as an adult. May spend hours complaining to other family members about how victimized she is by this child.

- Try to destroy their child's soul and self-worth to keep them tied to her.

Abusive women generally have borderline and/or narcissistic personality disorders. Although no one has all of the following characteristics, the greater the number that applies to one person, the more likely it is that this diagnosis applies. *These characteristics have been compiled from research, DSM IV, and personal experience with numerous individuals and children of abusive women.*