

What to Do When You Have Been Abusive

By Kai Cheng Thom



As I sit in my bed and begin to type (beds are my favorite typing places), there is a part of me that says, “Don’t write this article.”

There is a part of me that still resonates deeply with the fear and shame that surround the topics of abuse and intimate partner violence — the taboo that most communities have around talking not just about the fact that people experience rape and abuse, but that people we know and care about might be rapists and abusers. Perhaps most secret and shameful of all is the fear that we, ourselves, are or have been abusive — the fear that we could be those villains, those monsters in the night.

Nobody wants to be “an abuser.” No one wants to admit that they have hurt someone, especially when so many of us have been hurt ourselves.

But the truth is that abusers and survivors of abuse do not exist, and have never existed, in a dichotomy: sometimes, hurt people hurt people. In this rape culture we live in, sometimes it can be hard to tell the difference between the hurt you are experiencing and the hurt you are causing someone else.

In the years since this essay was originally published, we have seen, as a result of the #MeToo movement, an enormous shift in the intensity and frequency with which intimate partner violence and abuse is discussed in public. While this movement has brought about positive change and exposed many abusive people in power, it has also highlighted the complexity and epidemic nature of abuse. It has shown us, irrefutably, that survivors can also abuse.

It has shown us that we cannot think of abusers as incomprehensible monsters who must be exterminated — because abusers are also our heroes, lovers, friends, family. It has shown us

that, more urgently than ever, we must find new ways of responding to and healing from violence.

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Seven years ago, when I first started training as a support worker for survivors of intimate partner violence, I was sitting in a training workshop when someone asked what our organization's policy was on taking requests for support from people who were abusing their partners and wanted help stopping.

The answer was brusque and immediate: "We don't work with abusers. Period."

Fair enough, I thought. After all, an organization created to support survivors of rape and abuse should center survivors, not the people who hurt them. The only problem was, I wondered, what happens when people are both survivors and abusers? And if we don't work with abusers, who does?

Note: I am not, in this article, talking about whether or not a relationship can be "mutually abusive." This is a conversation for another time. Rather, I am suggesting that people who are survivors in one relationship are capable of being abusive in previous or later relationships.

The question of whether a relationship can be mutually abusive is probably an important one to address, for the practical reason that many violent relationships break down into a debate over which person is the abuser and which is the survivor. Sometimes, the distinction is very easy to make because one person clearly has more power than the other. Often, however, things are more complex — for example, when both people in a relationship experience high levels of social oppression or marginalization.

While I do not have a clear answer to this question, I do wonder if it is more important to focus on identifying and ending violent patterns of behavior than on assigning blame. If a loved one hurts me, for example, I may be justified in defending myself. I can still take responsibility, however, if my defensive actions result in disproportionate amounts of harm — which doesn't prevent my loved one from taking responsibility in their own turn.

Seven years later, as a therapist who has worked with many individuals who are “recovering” or “former” abusers, I am still looking for the answers to those questions. There are extremely few resources and organizations out there with the mandate, will, or knowledge to help people stop being abusive.

But doesn't the feminist saying go, “We shouldn't be teaching people how not to get raped; we should be teaching people not to rape”?

And, if so, doesn't it follow that we shouldn't only support people who have survived abuse but should also support people in learning how not to abuse?

When we are able to admit that the capacity to harm lies within ourselves — within us all — we become capable of radically transforming the conversation around abuse and rape culture. We can go from simply reacting to abuse and punishing “abusers” to preventing abuse and healing our communities. Because the revolution starts at home, as they say. The revolution starts in your house, in your own relationships, in your bedroom. The revolution starts in your heart.

The following is a nine-step guide to confronting the abuser in you, in me, in us all.

1. Listen to the Survivor

“Listen to the survivor” may seem to imply that there can only be one survivor in a given situation, or that the first person who calls out the other has to be the survivor of an abuse dynamic. This is not necessarily true. Today, I might give this section the title “Learn to Listen When Someone Says You Have Hurt Them.”

When one has been abusive, the very first — and one of the most difficult — skills of holding oneself accountable is learning to simply listen to the person or people whom one has harmed:

- Listening without becoming defensive.
- Listening without trying to equivocate or make excuses.
- Listening without minimizing or denying the extent of the harm.
- Listening without trying to make oneself the center of the story being told.

When someone, particularly a partner or loved one, tells you that you have hurt or abused them, it can be easy to understand this as an accusation or attack. Very often, this is our first assumption — that we are being attacked.

This is why so many perpetrators of abuse respond to survivors who confront them by saying something along the lines of, “I’m not abusing you. You are abusing me, right now, with this accusation!”

But this is the cycle of violence talking. This is the script that rape culture has built for us: a script in which there must be a hero and a villain, a right and a wrong, an accuser and an accused. What if we understood being confronted about perpetuating abuse as an act of courage — even a gift — on the part of the survivor?

What if, instead of reacting immediately in our own defense, we instead took the time to listen, to really try to understand the harm we might have done to another person?

When we think of accountability in terms of listening and love instead of accusation and punishment, everything changes. Listening without becoming defensive does not necessarily mean relinquishing one's own truth. We must be able to make room for varying perspectives and multiple emotional truths in our hearts.

2. Take Responsibility for the Abuse After Listening

The next step in holding oneself accountable is taking responsibility for the abuse. This means, simply enough, agreeing that you and only you are the source of physical, emotional, or psychological violence you have directed toward another person.

Remember, however, that you are not responsible for the violence that someone else has done to that person, or for harm that they have done to themselves. Taking responsibility means learning boundaries, which means accepting the weight of your own actions, no more and no less. It is not helpful to overstate the amount of harm you have done to another person, nor to collapse into a puddle of martyrdom. Taking responsibility means engaging critically with your actions, not delegating all of the thinking to somebody else.

A simple analogy for taking responsibility for abuse is taking responsibility for stepping on someone else's foot: There are many reasons why you might do such a thing — you were in a hurry, you weren't looking where you were going, or maybe no one ever taught you that it was wrong to step on other people's feet.

But you still did it. No one else — only you are responsible, and it is up to you to acknowledge and apologize for it. The same holds true for abuse: no one, and I really mean no one — not your partner, not patriarchy, not mental illness, not society, not the Devil — is responsible for the violence that you do to another person. A lot of factors can contribute to or influence one's reasons for committing abuse (see the point below), but in the end, only I am responsible for my actions, as you are for yours.

3. Accept That Your Reasons Are Not Excuses

There is an awful, pervasive myth out there that people who abuse others do so simply because they are bad people — because they are sadistic, or because they enjoy other people's pain.

This is, I think, part of the reason why so many people who have been abusive in the past or present resist the use of the terms “abuse” or “abuser” to describe their behavior. In fact, very, very, very few people who abuse are motivated to do so by sadism. In my experience as a therapist and community support worker, when people are abusive, it's usually because they have a reason based in desperation or suffering.

Some reasons for abusive behavior I have heard include: “I am isolated and alone, and the only person who keeps me alive is my partner. This is why I can't let my partner leave me.”

“My partner hurts me all the time. I was just hurting them back.”

“I am sick, and if I don't force people to take care of me, then I will be left to die.”

“I am suffering, and the only way to relieve the pain is to hurt myself or others.”

“I didn’t know that what I was doing was abuse. People always did the same to me. I was just following the script.”

“No one will love me unless I make them.” All of these are powerful, real reasons for abuse — but they are never excuses. There is no reason good enough to excuse abusive behavior. Reasons help us understand abuse, but they do not excuse it. Accepting this is essential to transforming culpability into accountability and turning justice into healing.

4. Don’t Play the “Survivor Olympics”

As I mentioned above, communities tend to operate on a survivor/abuser or victim/perpetrator dichotomy model of abuse. This is the belief that people who have survived abuse in one relationship can never be abusive in other relationships.

I find that social justice or leftist communities also tend to misapply social analysis to individual situations of abuse, suggesting that individuals who belong to oppressed or marginalized groups can never abuse individuals who belong to privileged groups (that is, that women can never abuse men, racialized people can never abuse white people, and so on).

But neither of the above ideas is true. Survivors of abuse in one relationship can, in fact, be abusive in other relationships.

And it’s easier for privileged individuals to abuse others because of the extra power social privilege gives them, but anyone is capable of abusing anyone given the right (or rather, wrong) circumstances. It can be easy, when confronted with the abuse we have perpetrated, to play “survivor Olympics.”

“I can’t be abusive,” we may want to argue, “I’m a survivor!” Or “The abuse I have survived is so much worse than what you’re

accusing me of!” Or “Nothing I do is abusive to you because you have more privilege than me.”

But survivors can be abusers, too. Anyone can be abusive, and comparing or trivializing doesn't absolve us of responsibility for it.

5. Take the Survivor's Lead

When having a dialogue with someone who has been abused, it's essential to give the survivor the space to take the lead in expressing their needs and setting boundaries. You should also take time to think about your own needs and boundaries without making the person you have harmed take care of you. This is why having support in the community is crucial. If basic needs are going unmet, no one can heal from abuse, nor can anyone truly be accountable.

If you have abused someone, it's not up to you to decide how the process of healing or accountability should work. This doesn't mean that you don't get to have rights or boundaries, or that you can't contribute actively to the process. It means that you don't get to say that the person you have hurt is “crazy” or that what they are expressing doesn't matter.

Instead, it might be a good idea to try asking the person who has confronted you questions like these: What do you need right now? Is there anything I can do to make this feel better? How much contact would you like to have with me going forward? If we share a community, how should I navigate situations where we might end up in the same place? How does this conversation feel for you, right now?

At the same time, it's important to understand that the needs of survivors of abuse can change over time, and that survivors may not always know right away — or ever — what their needs are. Being accountable and responsible for abuse means being patient, flexible, and reflective about the process of having dialogue with the survivor.

Having been witness to many community accountability processes that have seemed to create more harm for those involved, I must emphasize that survivor-led does not mean that those who identify as survivors are necessarily experts in transformative justice, nor that the identified survivor in a dynamic of abuse should get to dictate what happens to the identified abuser.

Survivors, understandably, may wish to get revenge on abusers and so may ask for violence to be done in the name of justice (also, abusers may wish to get revenge on survivors who name them and may try to manipulate the situation by making counterclaims of abuse). I have seen calls for abusers to be beaten up or put in life-threatening situations. This is a replication of the criminal justice system, which prioritizes retribution over recovery from violence. Criminal justice is interested in assigning blame and executing punishment, while transformative justice challenges the notion that punishment is inherent to justice.

I feel strongly that as long as punishment remains at the center of our thinking around accountability and justice, survivor-led processes are doomed to fall into the trap of individuals desperately trying to avoid accountability out of fear. Survivor-led, to me, means that survivors get to lead their own process of recovery, that survivors are given space to tell their stories and speak their needs (which criminal justice usually does not allow).

It does not mean that people who may have been deeply wounded are suddenly handed full responsibility for a community dialogue and rehabilitation process. Survivor-led does not mean that the community gets to abdicate its responsibility for providing support, safety, expertise, and leadership in making healing happen.

6. Face the Fear of Accountability

Being accountable for abuse takes a lot of courage. We live in a culture that demonizes and oversimplifies abuse, probably because we don't want to accept the reality that abuse is actually commonplace and can be perpetrated by anybody. A lot of people paint themselves into corners denying abuse because, to be quite honest, it's terrifying to face the consequences, real and imagined, of taking responsibility. And there are real risks: people have lost friends, communities, jobs, and resources over abuse. The risks are especially high for marginalized individuals — I am thinking particularly of Black and Brown folks here — who are likely to face harsh, discriminatory sentencing in legal processes.

If we are ever to see the dream of transformative justice become a widespread reality, we must collectively resist the culture of disposability that says that people who have done harm are no longer people, that they are “trash,” that they must be “canceled.” While consequences for harmful behavior are a necessary outcome of accountability, those consequences should not include actions that are themselves abusive. If you have placed your trust in the community by allowing it to make a decision about how you should take accountability, that trust is a sacred responsibility. The leaders of a process of justice are responsible for not abusing their power, just as you are responsible for not abusing yours.

I can only suggest that when it comes to ending abuse, it's easier to face our fear than live in it all of our lives. It's more healing to tell the truth than to hide inside a lie. When we hold ourselves accountable, we prove that the myth of the “monster” abuser is a lie.

7. Separate Shame from Guilt

Shame and social stigma are powerful emotional forces that can prevent us from holding ourselves accountable for being abusive. We don't want to admit to “being that person,” so we don't admit to having been abusive at all.

Some people might suggest that people who have been abusive ought to feel shame — after all, perpetrating abuse is wrong. I would argue, though, that this is where the difference between guilt and shame is key. Guilt is feeling bad about something you've done; shame is feeling bad about who you are. People who have been abusive should feel guilty for the specific acts of abuse they are responsible for. They should not feel shame about who they are because this means that abuse has become a part of their identity. It means that they believe that they are fundamentally a bad person — in other words, “an abuser.”

But if you believe that you are an “abuser,” a bad person who hurts others, then you have already lost the struggle for change — because we cannot change who we are. If you believe that you are a fundamentally good person who has done hurtful or abusive things, then you open the possibility for change.

8. Don't Expect Anyone to Forgive You

Being accountable is not about earning forgiveness. That is to say, it doesn't matter how accountable you are — nobody has to

forgive you for being abusive, least of all the person you have abused. In fact, using the process of “doing” accountability to manipulate or coerce someone into giving their forgiveness to you is an extension of the abuse dynamic. It centers the abuser, not the survivor. One shouldn’t aim for forgiveness when holding oneself accountable.

Rather, self-accountability is about learning how we have harmed others, why we have harmed others, and how we can stop.

But...

9. Forgive Yourself

You do have to forgive yourself. Because you can’t stop hurting other people until you stop hurting yourself. When one is abusive, when one is hurting so much on the inside that it feels like the only way to make it stop is to hurt other people, it can be terrifying to face the hard truth of words like abuse and accountability. One might rather blame others, blame society, blame the people we love, instead of ourselves.

This is true, I think, of community as well as individuals. It is so much easier, so much simpler, to create hard lines between good and bad people, to create walls to shut the shadowy archetype of “the abuser” out instead of mirrors to look at the abuser within.

Perhaps this is why self-accountability tools like this list are so rare. It takes courage to be accountable. To decide to heal. But when we do decide, we discover incredible new possibilities. There is good and bad in everyone. Anyone can heal, given the right circumstances, and everyone can heal, given the same. You are capable of loving and being loved. Always. Always. Always.

Author's Note: This article was originally published under the title "9 Ways to Be Accountable When You've Been Abusive" on the website Everyday Feminism on February 1, 2016. In the years since, a number of personal experiences and community events have caused me to rethink some aspects of the piece. While I stand behind its primary assertions, it feels important to me to address certain issues of nuance and practical application. On receiving the invitation to re-publish it in this collection (<https://truthout.org/articles/what-to-do-when-you-have-been-abusive/>), I was also offered the chance to make significant edits. My intention is both to remain accountable to the original version of the text, and to show clearly where my thinking has shifted over time — just as all of our beliefs and practices in the area of transformative justice are, and must be, evolving conversations.