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# Shattered Stars: An Editorial on Stress and Abuse

By: Amanda Jones



Growing up, I was the shy girl with the gift to make herself less important as often as possible. Coming from a home where abuse was rampant, you learn to decipher and predict what will happen next and try your best to escape from it. The memories of my childhood while living with my father were like trying to catch starlight while buried deep within a jar. The notion is there, but to reach out and touch love wasn't possible. He had a way of destroying the light and replacing it where darkness should never go; created dark stars made from ashes of terror and confusion. As I would walk the school halls, sit to eat lunch in the cafeteria, or try to speak up in class to answer a question (which I rarely did), I held each moment of my life in a black, burning ball of shame, confusion and guilt within me. And I wore the ashes and burn scars with downcast eyes and a weak smile.

Naturally, this made it difficult to make friends.

Most children going into kindergarten were encouraged by their parents to play and make lots of new friends (as to develop the muscles of their social skills and psychological developments) I was told not to mention anything that was happening at home. It was no one else's business. I needed to be very private.

For a five year old to be told that her life needed to be a secret created a deterrent in my ability to connect to other children and feel that I could engage in normal play. I was different, not a good different, but a bad different. And the other children will notice that I am bad if I say anything, so I need to be quiet.

Of course, there were one or two kids who were friendly with anyone, and I would just quietly follow them wherever they would go, not mentioning much but my name. All the while, hoping I would just blend into the pale,

plastered walls behind the posters of the alphabet and the chalkboards. I had a mission: I needed to keep my secret safe. All of this sounds heavy and thwarted, but this is the truth of what I was facing at five years old. I wasn't given the simple freedom to just be a child; to explore the world as a carefree being in the safety of my family and teachers. I was a prisoner to my family's dark secrets; to my father's mistakes. They had made each day

I loved and feared my father greatly. Every time he hit me because I counted my numbers wrong, or I was too slow to respond to a question, I gathered it all inside as guilt-ridden love. He was showing me that in order to be lovable, I needed his sharp touch. And, I ached for him to love and accept me. He was the final word, and I craved freedom in his opinion of me.

When you are a child, you are at the mercy of those who care for you.

This is a common story for so many child and victims of abuse. They are made to be so afraid of their abuser; they lose all control of what is real and safe in a relationship. Many of us identify with the abuser in a positive way, which is now identified psychologically as Stockholm syndrome. There are several progressive

black and hollow, as if the stars ceased to exist.



symptoms that develop over time as shown below:

### **The Components and Progression of Stockholm syndrome**

Following are the components of Stockholm syndrome as they relate to abusive and controlling relationships. Common symptoms include:

- Victim having positive feelings toward the abuser
- Victim having negative feelings toward family, friends, or authorities
- Abuser having positive feelings toward the victim
- Victim supporting or helping the abuser

## Following are several stages in the progression of Stockholm syndrome

1. The victim dissociates from his or her pain, helplessness or terror by subconsciously beginning to see the situation / world from the abuser's perspective. The victim begins to agree with the abuser and certain aspects of his or her own personality, opinions, and views will fade into the background.

2. By doing this, the victim begins to learn how to appease and please the abuser, which may keep him or her from being hurt or worse. Similarly this tactic can be used to manipulate the abuser into being less dangerous, at least for a little while.

3. After a while the victim begins to realize that his or her abuser portrays the same human characteristics as anyone else. At this point he or she will begin to see the abuser as less of a threat. Some abusers may even share personal information in an effort to bond with the victim and to promote pity rather than anger.

4. This bonding, in turn, leads to conflicting feelings (e.g., rage and pity) and illogical concern for the abuser. The victim may even ignore his or her own needs.

5. Once the traumatic event has ended, however, the victim must again learn not to dissociate from his or her emotions and not focus on the abuser. This can be a very difficult transition.

## Four situations or conditions are present that serve as a foundation for the development of Stockholm syndrome

\*Perceived or real threat to one's physical or psychological survival and belief that the abuser will carry out the threat. The abuser may:

\*Assure the victim that only cooperation keeps loved ones safe.

\*Offer subtle threats or stories of revenge to remind the victim that revenge is possible if they leave.

\*Have a history of violence leading the victim to believe they could be a target.



1. Presence of a small kindness from the abuser to the victim

-In some cases, small gestures such as allowing a bathroom visit or providing food/water are enough to alter the victim's perception of the abuser.

-Often times, a birthday card, a gift (usually provided after a period of abuse), or a special treat can be seen as proof that the abuser is not "all bad."

2. Victim's isolation from other perspectives.

-Victims have the sense they are always being watched. For their survival they begin to take on the abuser's perspective. This survival technique can become so intense that the victim develops anger toward those trying to help.

3. In severe cases of Stockholm Syndrome the victim may feel the abusive situation is their fault.

-Perceived or real inability to escape from the situation •The victim may have financial obligations, debt, or instability to the point that they cannot survive on their own.

4. The abuser may use threats including taking the children, public exposure, suicide, or a life of harassment for the victim.



#### **How to Help: What to do and what not to do**

While each situation is different, there are general guidelines to consider if you know or suspect that someone you love is suffering from Stockholm syndrome

- Your loved one has probably been given a choice – the “relationship” or the family. Because the victim believes that choosing the family will result in adverse consequences, the family always comes second.

- Your loved one is being told the family is trying to ruin their wonderful “relationship.”

Remember: the more you pressure the victim, the more you prove that point.

- Your goal is to remain in contact with your loved one during the abusive “relationship.” There are many channels of communication, including phone calls, letters, cards, emails, etc. Keep contact brief and consider contacting him or her at “traditional” times such as holidays, birthdays, and special occasions.

- Your loved one may open up communication and provide subtle hints about his or her “relationship” with the abuser. If so, listen and let them know that you are behind any decision they need to make. Remember: he or she may be exploring what support is available but may not be ready to ask for help just yet.

Don't wait until you are so far beaten into the murk and grime of life before you get help. There is hope. There is a future for you and/or your loved one. Act now.

**All information on Stockholm syndrome found at [www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)**