Office of the Oklahoma Attorney General
LETHALITY ASSESSMENT PROTOCOL PROGRAM

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NEWSLETTER

When "WHy Don't They Leave?" Is The Wrong Question

It's question number ten on the LAP Form: "Has the victim left or separated from the person after living together or being married?" While this question on the LAP Form specifically pertains to cohabitation and separation, it points to a broader question that both system professionals and members of the public may find themselves asking when evaluating situations involving intimate partner violence (IPV):

"Why don't they just leave?"

To someone outside an abusive relationship, the answer may seem simple. End the relationship, tell the person to stop, and move on to the next chapter. However, this question means something very different to someone experiencing abuse. There are many factors that may influence whether a victim stays, leaves, or leaves but ultimately returns.

Extreme Danger

Statistically, leaving an abusive relationship is one of the most dangerous times for an IPV victim. Separation, or the period surrounding a victim's decision to leave, is considered a flashpoint, a time when relationship tension has the potential to escalate dramatically, increasing the immediate risk of abuse or violence.

Bring LAP Training to Your Community

Partner with Us to Strengthen Your Response to IPV

Our LAP Training is CLEET-Approved for two (2) hours of continuing education or mental health. If your agency or community is interested in strengthening your response to intimate partner violence, we would be happy to provide a LAP training. Our team offers in-person and virtual sessions tailored to law enforcement, prosecutors, and service providers. To request a training or learn more, please fill out the form below—we're here to support your team in implementing a proactive, coordinated approach to victim safety.

Training Request Form

When a victim leaves an abusive relationship, the perpetrator may perceive a loss of control and attempt to regain that control through physical violence, threats, stalking, or retaliation against the victim or their loved ones. The danger does not necessarily end when the relationship does; in many cases, the period immediately following separation carries significant risk.



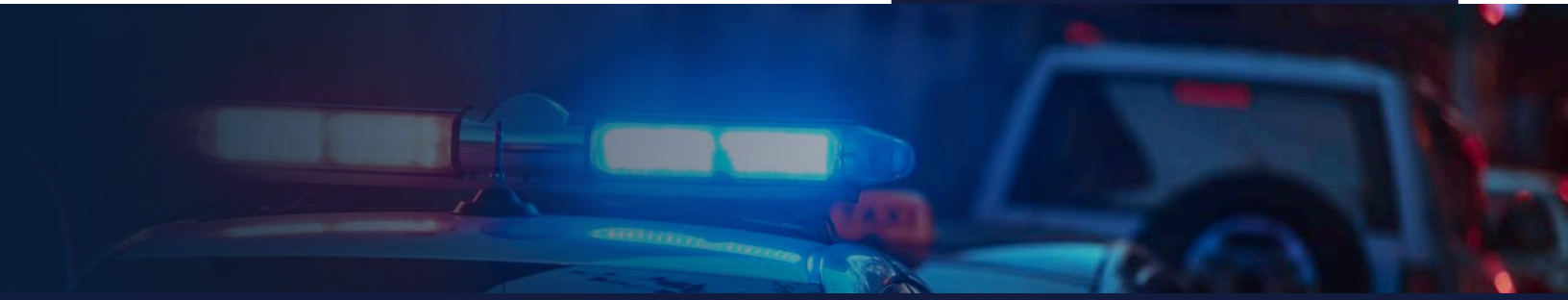
Trauma Bonding

Many victims experience an emotional roller coaster throughout an abusive relationship. An abuser may shift between violence, intimidation, fear, affection, and periods of seemingly genuine kindness or remorse.

Numbers to Know

Oklahoma has consistently ranked in the Top 10 in women being murdered by men in single victim/single offender incidents since 1996. The most recent state rankings ranked Oklahoma as 2nd in the nation when analyzing 2020 homicide data.

Violence Policy Center. (2023). When men murder women: A review of 25 years of female homicide victimization in the United States. Retrieved from: https://www.vpc.org/studies/wmmw2023.pdf



These intermittent periods of affection can create a sense of relief and reinforce the emotional connection between the victim and the abuser.

Over time, this cycle can make the relationship incredibly difficult to leave. A victim may become emotionally dependent on the person harming them, making the decision to leave far more complicated than it may appear from the outside.

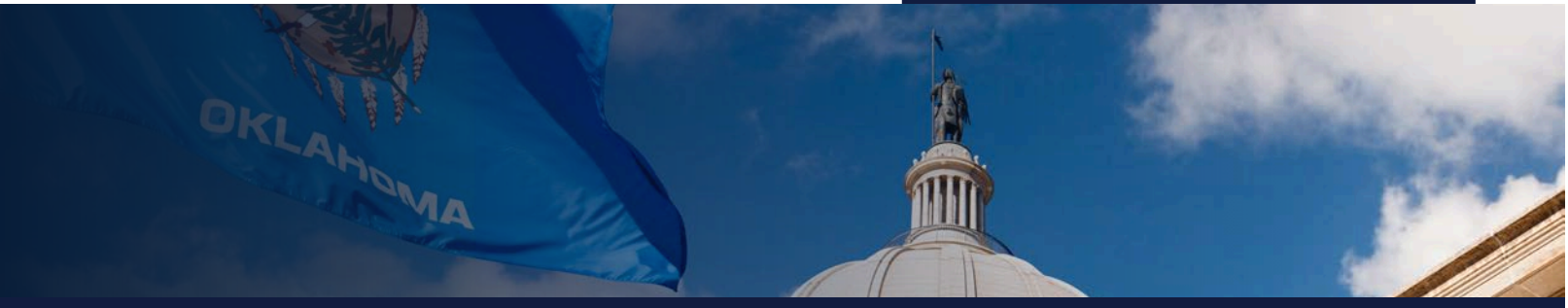
Financial Abuse

Abusers commonly restrict a victim's access to employment, money, or other financial resources. A victim may have little or no independent source of income and may rely entirely on the abuser for basic necessities.

Leaving an abusive relationship under these circumstances can mean losing access to housing, transportation, food, healthcare, or other essential resources. For some victims, leaving may feel like choosing between an abusive relationship and immediate financial instability or homelessness.

Systemic Isolation

Financial control is often accompanied by social isolation and ultimately entrapment. Abusers may gradually limit a victim's contact with family, friends, coworkers, or other people who could provide support or a safe place to turn.



When those connections have been intentionally weakened or severed, a victim may have fewer people available to help them recognize the abuse, make a safety plan, or leave when they are ready. Isolation can make an abusive relationship feel like the victim's only option.

Erosion of Self-Worth

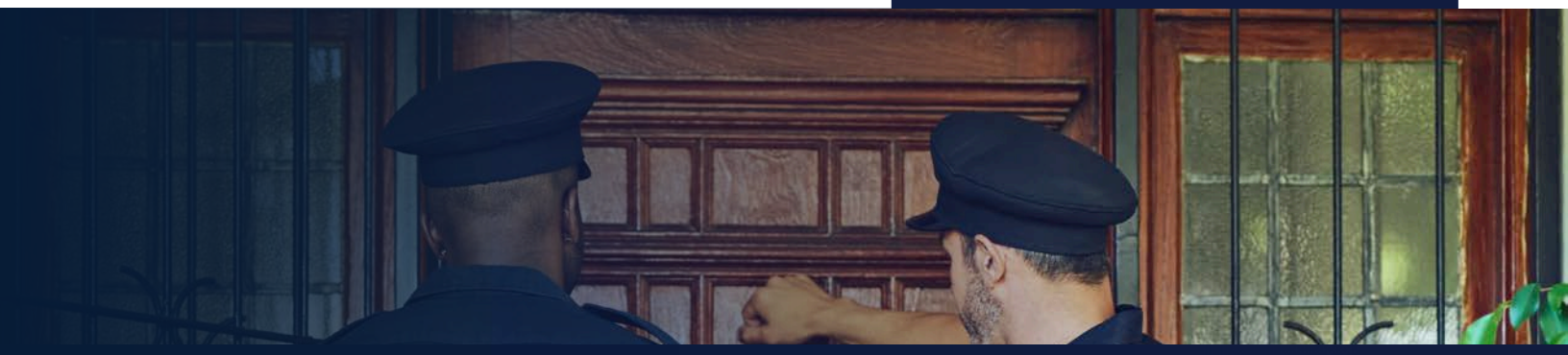
After months or even years of verbal and emotional abuse, victims may begin to internalize the harmful messages they have repeatedly heard. They may experience intense feelings of self-doubt, blame, and shame or begin to believe that they are responsible for the abuse.

A victim may come to believe that they cannot function independently or that they do not deserve anything better. When abuse has eroded someone's sense of self-worth, leaving can feel impossible.

Children

When children are involved, leaving can present additional challenges. A victim may remain in an abusive relationship because they believe staying will protect their children from further harm. They may also fear retaliation against their children, losing custody, or navigating a difficult custody dispute with their abuser.

For some victims, staying may feel like the safest option available to protect their children, even when remaining in the relationship carries its own risks.



False Hope of Change

Victims may also hold onto the hope that their abuser will change. Periods of affection, apologies, promises, or "love-bombing" can reinforce that hope and make the victim believe that the person they first knew is still there.

A victim may cling to memories of who their abuser was at the beginning of the relationship or believe that, with enough time, things will return to how they once were. Hope for change can be a powerful reason someone remains in an abusive relationship.

Beyond "Why Don't They Leave?"

These are only a few of the reasons a victim may not leave an abusive relationship. There are countless other factors that may influence a victim's decision to stay, leave, or return. Every situation is different, and there is rarely a single reason why someone remains in an abusive relationship.

It is not our job to judge when or whether a victim leaves. Our job is to be there for the victim, regardless of what choice they make. We can support their decisions, help them understand their options, and ensure they have access to the resources they need to move toward safety.

So, when you ask Question 10 on the LAP Form, remember the reasons why someone may not leave.

The answer is rarely as simple as "Why don't they just leave?"

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"The Lethality Assessment Protocol represents one of our most critical tools in protecting vulnerable Oklahomans. This partnership between law enforcement and victim advocates isn't just procedure - ***it is a lifeline that saves lives.***"

GENTNER DRUMMOND
Oklahoma Attorney General