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Should Anything be Avoided, A Resource for Friends, Family and Supporters

This resource shares insight for friends, family and supporters of someone experiencing emotional or psychological abuse. It explores natural reactions, questions and actions through the lens of support. Every situation is unique. The goal is not to provide answers, but to offer perspective.

Watching a loved one navigate confusion, control or emotional abuse can be extremely painful. The natural response is to rescue, step in, fix the problem, shake them awake or pull them out.

The response definitely comes from a place of love. However, in emotionally abusive situations, the attempts to step in and fix the problem can unintentionally cause harm.

When someone is living in a dense fog of never-ending chaos, they may not yet see what outsiders see. They've been programmed to only see the reality through the abuser's eyes, thoughts, suggestions, contradictions and words. Holding their hand is navigating the journey with them, at their pace.

The moment a "rescuer" crosses into their perceived world, it becomes additional pressure. And it could feel similar to the pressure and control from an abuser. True support means being a sanctuary.

We've shared a few phrases, questions, actions and instincts to gently navigate. We'll also share our insight into the possible "why's."

Questions & Phrases that cause overload and additional anxiety

1. **"Why don't you just leave?"**
   From a loved one's perspective, it seems like a really simple question. For the receiver, leaving is often the most dangerous, overwhelming and complicated step imaginable. Asking why they don't leave implies they are choosing their pain, which adds a heavy layer of "disappointing someone else" to their already exhausting and ever-changing reality.

2. "I would never let someone treat me like that."
   The truth is, the loved one making that statement is not in it, living it. It can be received as judgmental. Unless someone is experiencing or has experienced the exact same thing, the statement is untrue. It's a story they're sharing. Psychological abuse diminishes the receiver's self-worth, their ability to "see" reality from the outside. It is a slow, intentional and systematic erosion of a human.

3. "Can't you see what they're doing to you?"
   Questioning someone's ability to look at their abuser differently, before they are ready, causes them to become defensive. They have been programmed to defend their abuser at all costs. It's a very fine line to navigate from the outside, with grace and patience.

4. "Why would you love someone who clearly doesn't love you?"
   When there is emotional and psychological abuse embedded in a relationship, love is complicated. What began with love bombing shifted into trauma bonding. Manipulation is used every day to keep the receiver guessing if today will be "a good day" or if today will be "a day filled with silence." This kind of love cannot be turned off like a light switch. Questioning their feelings implies their emotions are foolish or invalid, adding deep personal shame to an already heartbreaking reality.

Actions with Unintended Consequences

- Issuing ultimatums ("It's them or me"):
  Ultimatums will cause a fight or flight response. Unless they have made up their mind to leave, there is no choice. The answer will not be the loved one. There is also a risk they will tell the abuser, reinforcing the programming that the loved one is against them.

- Confronting the abuser directly:
  This is navigating into dangerous territory for the loved one and the receiver. The abuser may appear calm and charming or fly into an explosive rage. Unless there is an immediate physical emergency requiring emergency services, confrontation isn't safe. What isn't visible is the aftermath. The retaliation to the receiver will be devastating.

- **Stepping in:**
  Making decisions for a loved one, speaking for them or arranging anything without their explicit consent continues the pattern - loss of control. This is part of their daily existence and one of the many negative ties that bind them to the abuser.

Holding their Hand … The Anchor

Supporting a loved one as they navigate an emotionally abusive relationship is about being fully present, when they reach out. Embracing them with open arms, allowing them to share their reality without questioning their sanity and being a safety net for them will help.

When the loved one has been silent, has lost a little of themselves, their soul is still there, just buried a little deeper. A gentle reminder of their strength will help. From the words of Maya Angelou: *"Nothing can dim the light which shines from within."*

Breaking through the fog takes strength, resilience, time and tremendous support. When they choose to begin again - walking by their side and holding their hand is the most courageous step of all. As F. Scott Fitzgerald once said, *"Vitality shows not only in the ability to persist, but in the ability to start over."]*

A Quick Self-Check for Supporters

When the urge arises (and it will) to offer advice, intervene or react out of worry, take a moment to pause and ask yourself three questions:

1. **Is what I'm about to say about me or about my loved one?**
2. **Does any action taken leave my loved one with the ability to freely choose?**
3. **Will sharing advice seem like instruction or control?**

Conversations should always be about them, listening to their stories and possibly their pain, no matter how difficult it is to hear. Holding someone's hand and walking at their pace, even when standing still, is one of the hardest things to do.