

# Should I stay or should I go now?

## Mothers' Lived Experiences of Abusive Relationships and How to Survive.

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This study completed in November 2016 investigated the lived experience of 9 mothers who survived abusive interpersonal relationships. I explored social attachment experiences in particular the role of motherhood and how the consequences of abusive interactions can significantly influence their decision making processes.

### Methods

I used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) employing semi-structured interviews. The sample population were adult mothers who had been free from an abusive partner for at least one year and who were accessed from a range of arenas.

### Findings

I found that an extraordinary series of traumatic relationships take place from early childhood and throughout participants' lives. This pattern of abuse led to dysfunctional coping strategies such as social withdrawal, and a vulnerability to suicide. However, mothers often demonstrated the ability to make complex and subtle risk assessment decisions which included employing the learnt use of silence from childhood in order to minimise and protect themselves and their children from harm.

### Conclusions

The relationship difficulties across the life course are explained using the ecological model as a framework with an emphasis on the use of attachment theory and theories of power and control and highlights: 1) interpersonal violence does not take place in a social vacuum 2) continuously living in a world which provokes anxiety and fear alters perceptions of attachment relationships and a sense of self is lost 3) a combination of partner infidelity; feeling 'unfulfilled' and 'I'm worth more than this' and a realisation that their children were 'in danger' seemed to trigger a significant break in the relationship and the decision to leave for good.

### Implications

For practitioners there needs to be an ideological shift away from understanding domestic abuse as an isolated social event, but as deeply entrenched within women/mothers' experiences throughout the course of their lives; 2) Formal support agencies need to recognise that the decision making skills of mothers can be enhanced by promoting methods that empower the 'self' and encourage wider social engagement 3) Interventions and support should be made available to help mothers 'rediscover' and 'reinvent' themselves, and thereby present the possibility of a future without violence.