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Reactive Abuse: What It is and Why Abusers Rely on It



By Jenn Rockefeller

One of the most common tactics abusers use is to shift blame for the abuse onto the victim. The abuser will claim the victim is the abuser because of the reaction the victim has. The abuser may even attempt to convince the victim that there is nothing worth reacting over and that the victim is overreacting to the abuse. What the victim is actually experiencing is called reactive abuse.

Definition

Reactive abuse occurs when the victim reacts to the abuse they are experiencing. The victim may scream, toss out insults, or even lash out physically at the abuser. The abuser then retaliates by telling the victim that they are, in fact, the abuser.

Why abusers rely on it

Abusers rely on this “reactive abuse” because it is their “proof” that the victim is unstable and mentally ill. The abuser will hold these reactions against the victims indefinitely. It could be years later and the abuser will say, “Well, back in (whatever year), you had this reaction and acted all crazy. You’re the crazy one! You need help.”

Sometimes abusers use this reaction as an excuse to go to police or even file for protective orders of their own.

A method of manipulation

To manipulate is to unfairly influence a situation. When an abuser claims they are the ones being abused, they are manipulating us into believing we are at fault for the abuse. The abusers are conditioning and manipulating us to accept the blame. The longer this blame shifting goes on, the longer we will believe we are to blame for the reactive outbursts and abuse that the abuser is dishing out. We will begin to believe we are the violent and unstable ones.

This manipulation can even go so far as to cause us to feel shame. When we react, it causes the abuser to claim we are the abusive ones. But these reactions also add a second element to the mix – they cause us to feel bad about ourselves to the point of guilt and shame. We act against what we know to be true about ourselves – that we are good, kind, capable, loving people. But that goes out the window when we experience the guilt and shame more and more. The guilt and shame that the abusers continue to condition us to feel.

Reactive abuse vs. mutual abuse

According to [domesticshelters.org](https://www.domesticshelters.org), mutual abuse is when both partners are **equally abusive** to one another. Many survivors often ask themselves if they are abusive too because of how they react, but the truth is that **mutual abuse is very rare and many experts don’t believe it exists**. The power and control dynamics involved in domestic violence would make it nearly impossible for both partners to be abusive.

The key word here is “react.” That’s the difference between reactive abuse and mutual abuse. Victims and survivors *react* to the abuse doled out by the abuser.

What we can do instead

When you see yourself reacting in this manner, many times you begin to say to yourself, “Whoa, this isn’t me. This isn’t how I am normally.” When you begin to ask yourself those questions, you know something is not right with the relationship. I know I thought those things before – that I knew how I was reacting wasn’t me. It wasn’t who I was. That’s what the abuser wants – to make you question yourself, your character, and your integrity. But many times, by the time we get to the point of asking ourselves those questions, we are either too scared to leave the abuser or we just don’t have the means to do so.

So what can we do instead? The abusers bank on us reacting negatively to their tactics. When we begin to truly think about how we respond to them, we are taking back our power. We begin to respond and not react. To react is almost like an automatic thing – it’s the fight or flight response. But responding involves a thought process that requires us to really consider our thoughts and actions.

Within the realm of domestic violence, there is always one who initiates or instigates the problems in the relationship. It comes back to that one person needing power and control over their victim. That’s what abuse is – the imbalance of power. The abuser, however, would like us to believe otherwise and say, “Well, we were abusive to each other. It’s mutual abuse.” It’s because the abusers will never accept responsibility for their actions and instead shift blame for the abuse onto us.

If you or someone you know is in an abusive relationship, there is help. You can visit the Break the Silence website at www.breakthesilencedv.org or chat with one of our helpline advocates at 855-287-1777.

By [MeghanM](#) January 28, 2019 Survivor Spot, Uncategorized No Comments

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