

Mothers abused by partners see decline in mental health even after relationship ends

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Even after leaving a violent or controlling relationship, the mental health of mothers may actually get worse before it gets better, a new study suggests.

Researchers found that in the two years after the end of an abusive relationship, mothers showed poorer [mental health](#), became more depressed and maintained high levels of anxiety. In those areas, they were no better off than [women](#) who stayed in abusive relationships.

However, abused mothers who had more [social support](#) fared better after the end of their relationship than did similar mothers with less help from friends and family.

"Our findings really help us understand how unstable those first few years are for mothers who leave violent or controlling relationships," said Kate Adkins, lead author of the study, who did the work as a doctoral student at Ohio State University.

"Even though getting out of the relationship may be good in the long run, they first have to deal with multiple sources of stress, including financial problems, single parenting and sharing custody with the abuser."

Adkins conducted the study with Claire Kamp Dush, assistant professor of human development and family science at Ohio State. Their results appear online in the journal *Social Science Research* and will be published in a future print edition.

The findings don't suggest that women shouldn't leave abusive partners, Kamp Dush emphasized.

"What our results mean is that these women still need a lot of support and a lot of services even after they leave. Family members and friends may think things are OK because she has left the abuser. But she still needs support and she still needs social services," Kamp Dush said.

The researchers used data from the Fragile Families and Child Well-being study, a project of Princeton and Columbia universities. They used data on about 2,400 mothers who were married to, or co-habiting with, the father of their child at the end of the first year of the three-study.

They separated the mothers into three groups: those who experienced no abuse, those in controlling relationships (in which fathers were extremely critical and insulting, and controlled her actions) and those in physically violent relationships. They also looked at whether those relationships continued or ended by the end of the three years.

In addition, women were tested for levels of depression and anxiety, and levels of social support and religious involvement.

Results showed that all women - including those in non-violent relationships who stayed with their partners throughout the study - showed higher levels of depression and anxiety by the end of the three years.

That was probably because of the nature of this sample, Adkins said. These were nearly all low-income and minority women who had just become mothers, so they were under a lot of stress, Adkins said.

However, those who stayed in violent and controlling relationships - and those who left such unions - showed significantly greater increases in

depression and anxiety, compared to those left or who remained in non-violent relationships.

Why did women who left violent and controlling relationships continue to experience larger increases in depression and anxiety?

A key reason may have been that, because of the shared child, the mothers still had substantial contact with their abusers.

Findings showed that, of abused women whose relationship ended, about half talked to or saw the father once a week. Only about a quarter were in contact with him a few times a year or less.

"They might be going through a divorce, or working out child arrangements. Research shows that more than a third of women continue to experience physical abuse and 95 percent experience emotional abuse following the end of the relationship. All of this adds to the stress and anxiety they already feel," Adkins said.

The one sliver of good news was that abused women who had the support of friends and family did not show as much depression and anxiety as did women without that level of support.

"After the relationship ends, that is when these mothers really need the protection and help of their family and friends," Kamp Dush said.

Higher levels of religious involvement did not by itself protect abused mothers from depression and anxiety, the study found. However, it is possible that the religious involvement was associated with social support, and mothers received help and encouragement through people they met through their church activities, Adkins said.

Adkins, who is currently a family therapist working with domestic

violence victims, said the results are consistent with what she sees in her practice.

"People often wonder why abused women don't leave their partners," she said. "But as this study shows, things aren't necessarily better after you leave an abuser, at least right away. It's a difficult process."

But these results shouldn't dissuade abused mothers from leaving their partners, particularly when there are safety concerns to themselves or to their children, she said.

"The number one reason to leave is safety, not only for the mothers but for their children as well. While things may not get better right away, we only looked at up to two years after the [relationship](#) ended. We're not sure what happens after that," Adkins said.

Provided by The Ohio State University

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