

Ask Amanda: Isn't Reactive Abuse Just Victim-Blaming?

Why do I get called an abuser when I'm just trying to defend myself against him?

By DomesticShelters.org

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Q: My ex was abusive toward me for the whole three years we were together and one night after a really scary fight I called the police when he wouldn't let me leave our house. Then, he tried to claim I was the abusive one, telling police I was the one who shoved him, and that I was crazy.

But the fight started because he told me he was going to kill me, and I pushed him to try and get out the door. In the process, a picture frame fell off the wall and broke, which he showed to the police and tried to claim I threw at him. He was also holding his arm like I'd actually hurt him, but he's way bigger than I am. The police threatened to arrest us both. Afterward, I started questioning myself. Was I really an abuser or was this just another manipulation tactic from my ex?

A: Yes, it's a manipulation tactic and no, shoving your way out of danger doesn't make you an abuser. "Reactive abuse" is a term associated with this that shifts the blame onto the victim. An abuser will try to claim reactive abuse when the survivor fights back or defends themselves, sometimes claiming that the victim is mentally unstable or "crazy" and reacted through physical violence.

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That's because when law enforcement arrives on scene, they need to determine who the primary aggressor is—the person who poses the most serious, ongoing threat—and if more than one person is claiming they were attacked, sometimes both parties end up arrested, which can cause dire consequences for the survivor.

In “Help Police Determine Who Is the Primary Aggressor,” Lisa Fontes writes, “If the police misidentify the victim as an aggressor, the victim can face harmful legal consequences including domestic violence prosecution, and loss of child custody, housing and immigration rights. In addition, people who are not identified properly as crime victims may not be eligible for orders of protection, shelter, and funding and psychotherapy through the Victims of Crime Act.”

Even if the survivor is not arrested in that moment, abusers have been known to claim reactive abuse later on in court in order to try to make their case. They may also throw out the term “mutual abuse,” as though both survivor and victim are equally abusive toward one another. It's another form of manipulation by the abuser. While relationships can be unhealthy, even toxic, abuse is not two people who simply fight. Abuse is a calculated pattern of power and control by one person that escalates over time. It would be extremely unlikely that both partners would be abusers and victims at the same time.

In either case, an abuser might claim they were just trying to defend themselves against the survivor. They might say they never even touched the survivor initially, that the survivor was the one who pushed or hit them first.

Reactions to abuse can also include yelling, the silent treatment, or other “tactics” that, when used in a pattern of power and control, are abusive. But to a survivor, they may be the only way they can protect themselves.

incidents of abuse in the past where the police were never called—shoving, yelling, sexual coercion or assault. Over time, this pattern of ongoing abuse has built up to a point where the survivor feels afraid for her life and when the time comes that she feels like she might not make it out alive, she fights back, as you did.

And that’s when the abuser claims the survivor is using “reactive abuse” to harm them.

Therefore, it’s important for you, the survivor, to show the false equivalency between the pattern of abuse inflicted onto you and your emotional response. The question of who is afraid of the other is central to understanding a situation like this.

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What’s more, like you described, a survivor may actually question herself. *Am I to blame? Was it my fault? Should I have kept my cool? Did I overreact?* This is the result of manipulation, gaslighting and psychological abuse by an abusive partner who has often purposefully torn down a survivor’s sense of self-worth to the point where she begins to believe she deserved the abuse inflicted because of her actions. (No one deserves abuse, in case that wasn’t clear.)

Which brings us to the question of—so, what do I do if I need to fight back? In an ideal world, you wouldn’t need to get to this point. If you’re able to identify abusive red flags early and reach out for help, you can create a safety plan with a trained domestic violence advocate which can help prepare you with a plan of escape for when the abuser escalates or if and when you’re ready to leave for good. It might be a good idea to install the eBodyGuard app on your phone that can call 911 for you just by yelling that you’re in danger. It is set to “eBodyguard now” as the activation word you can create a unique trigger word to activate the 911 call, or touch the red SOS button.



incidents, threatening text messages or social media messages the abuser sent, audio recordings of threats or abuse, or witness bystanders who can vouch for you as the survivor.

And always remember—abuse is not your fault and it's never deserved. It's also not your responsibility to end the abuse, only to keep yourself and your children safe.

Have a question for Ask Amanda? Message us on Facebook, Twitter or email AskAmanda@DomesticShelters.org.

Ask Amanda is meant to offer helpful resources and information about domestic violence. If in crisis, please reach out to your nearest domestic violence shelter for the guidance of a trained advocate.

