Getting Inside The Head Of The Abusive Personality

Let’s get inside the head of the abusive mentality. But first let’s define abuse. Abuse in a relationship reflects a pattern(s) of behavior that is manifestly (or passive-aggressively) bullying, demeaning, manipulative, intimidating, threatening, coercive, and/or restrictingly controlling.

The key word is pattern. Most non-abusive individuals perpetrate insensitivities from time to time that may be experienced as abusive. This may make the behavior abusive. But it is the pattern of behaviors that makes the individual abusive.

What do we know about abusive personalities? We that they are controlling. Then again, aren’t most of us controlling at times? Sometimes very? What, then, separates your garden variety controlling personality from an abusively controlling personality? The answer, fundamentally, is motive. Where the motive is to coerce—to remind one’s partner who’s in charge—this suggests the machinations of the abusive mentality.

What else do we know about abusers? We know that, underlying their “requests” is often the lurking threat, “Cooperate with me….or else!” The subtext is, “You don’t want to disappoint me. Consequences will follow from your disappointing me!” In other words, appeals that may seem reasonable on the surface are often, beneath the surface, less appeals than warnings, demands.

Let me stress: Abusive individuals rarely makes requests. More often, they make demands disguised as requests. When you frustrate their demands, you are defying them. There is no middle ground: either you are cooperative and accommodating, or else perceived as defiant. Their thinking goes something like this (the → sign means “really means that”):

I’m asking you to stop hanging out with that guy→I demand that you stop hanging out with that guy→I expect you to meet my demand→Less than your full compliance with my demand means that you are defying me→Your defiance of me is punishable.

The abusive man, in this case, doesn’t just want things; he feels entitled to what he wants. Again, his thinking:

I want → I must have → I’m entitled to have!

As in all narcissistic/sociopathic disturbance, an inflated self-entitlement informs, indeed drives, the abusive mentality. Not only do abusers feel entitled to what they want, but also how they want it, and when and where they want it.
Merely by virtue of their wanting it, abusive individuals will feel automatically entitled to your cooperation, undivided attention, compassion, tolerance, respect, compliance, admiration, you name it. And because they feel entitled to these things, they feel they don’t have to earn any of them.

This, of course, is the very nature of entitlement. Theirs are unearned privileges, yet their unearned status in no way diminishes the abusers’ perceived right to them.

The abuser’s rage feeds off her sense of entitlement. She thinks:

I want this → I am entitled to it → You owe me what I’m entitled to → If you withhold it, I’m entitled to be enraged → In my entitled rage, I’m not responsible for my destructive, abusive response!

The abusive clients with whom I’ve worked are consistently stubborn, dug-in rationalizers. They chronically see themselves as victims. Their sense of themselves as victims is deeply entrenched and invested. They may feel “the victim” of many many things, including being inconvenienced.

It is from their self-engendered victim-status that blame flows so naturally; from blame, the anger/rage; from the anger/rage, the rationalization of aggressive/abusive responses.

It’s also the case that once abusive individuals have established a pattern of their self-perceived victimization, their threshold for feeling subsequently victimized decreases; now, it takes less and less for them to feel victimized, perhaps only a minor disappointment or frustration. This is why many abusive individuals can find almost any basis to complain, to feel slighted, thereby tripping (and licensing) their abusiveness.

Abusive individuals, at bottom, feel entitled not to be burdened by whatever feels burdensome to them. It is your job, your responsibility, to alleviate their burden. Your failure to do so, from their self-centered perspective, is an abdication of your duty, a form of betrayal.

Not surprisingly, many abusive individuals tend to think in paranoid and problematically rigid ways. They tend to rigidly attribute malice to those who disappoint them. Deploying spectacular powers of rationalization and projection, they see themselves ironically (and, of course, conveniently) habitually as victim—as the betrayed, exploited party—a warped perception that ratchets up their anger, lubricating their impending abusive response.

Sometimes underlying abandonment issues (including borderline personality disorder) fuel the possessive/controlling behaviors of abusive individuals. In such cases, their thinking chain goes something like this:
**Don’t leave me→Alone, I am nothing!→For this reason, you can’t leave me!→If you leave me, you will be defying me→If you defy me, I’ll make you pay!**

Here again we see how the abusive individual automatically codifies the failure of a partner’s compliance as “defiance,” which, in the abuser’s eyes, justifies the forthcoming mean, vindictive, abusive response.

From a gender standpoint it is clear that men have no patent on abuse. Women, like men, can be abusive in their relationships—to their partners, children (and others). But men are better leveraged, in general, to exercise their abuse more harshly and dangerously, if for no other reason than their comparative physical strength advantage over women. There are many exceptions to this rule; but the rule holds as a generality. Accordingly, you’ll find more women seeking (and desperately needing) shelter from abusive men than men from abusive women.

What percentage of abusive individuals are out and out sociopaths? There is disagreement on this question. Clearly many abusive personalities meet the criteria for sociopathic personality, and many who don’t nevertheless share with the sociopath the alarming tendency (in their actively abusive states) to view others as objects whose principal purpose on earth is to meet their needs, however excessive, inappropriate, unilateral, and selfish.

In other words, at the heart of both relationship abuse and sociopathy is an exploitative process in which one individual’s utter, contemptuous lack of respect for another enables the former’s self-justified exploitation/abuse of the latter.

In this sense, when abusive individuals are unleashing their abusiveness, they are objectifying, and demeaning, their victims in much the same (if not identical) way as sociopaths.