

When Victims Kill

Overview

When a woman responds to chronic domestic abuse or coercive control with violence, her actions are often misunderstood as ‘sudden,’ ‘irrational,’ or motivated by rage. These acts frequently represent a reaction to a culmination of prolonged abuse, degradation, and perceived entrapment. They are best understood within the framework of cumulative trauma and as a survival response, not a momentary ‘loss of control.’

1. The Myth of the ‘Snap’

Popular narratives and courtroom portrayals often claim that an abused woman ‘snapped’ when she injures or kills her abuser. This framing suggests impulsiveness and emotional instability, echoing the patriarchal ‘hysterical woman’ label of old. It erases the context of prolonged coercion and control that preceded the violence. Forensic evidence contradicts this: most victims who use lethal or near-lethal force against abusers have endured long-term campaigns of domination, characterized by controlling behaviors, surveillance (physical and technological monitoring), humiliation, isolation, and psychological entrapment. The victim’s response represents not an impulsive outburst, but the culmination of sustained coercion and abuse, a final act of realization and resistance to their prolonged victimization.

2. Cumulative Trauma and Learned Entrapment

Drawing from Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) and Walker’s *Cycle of Abuse* (1979) framework, coercive control generates a state of chronic traumatic entrapment. It comprises a pattern of abusive behaviour rather than a single act. Its effect may be cumulative, as the victim lives in a state of high arousal, in which their nervous system seeks to adapt and respond to constant threat. Over time, cognitive distortions form. Escape feels impossible, help appears

futile, and danger (death?) feels inevitable. When violence finally occurs, it is often a reaction, the product of cumulative trauma, not acute rage.

3. Rage or Survival?

While anger may surface, it usually masks a more profound effect—terror. What appears as rage is often the eruption of suppressed fear and despair after years of oppression and endurance. It is not aggression for dominance; it is aggression for liberation, of outrage. In forensic terms, such violence reflects a disintegrative survival response, a final effort to reassert control over one's existence when every other avenue has been closed off.

4. The Role of Coercive Control

Evan Stark (2007, 2023) reframed domestic violence and coercive control as a liberty crime, where the victim's autonomy and personhood are systematically stripped away. Within this model, the eventual act of violence can be seen as an attempt to restore agency rather than to gain power. It is often triggered not by physical assault alone, but by psychological conditions of psychological imprisonment, the total dominance of another's will.

5. Forensic and Judicial Implications

Understanding the psychology of coercive control response has direct implications for judicial assessment and sentencing. These factors should be considered:

- The act is rarely premeditated or retaliatory.
- It is frequently reactive, defensive, and survival-oriented.
- Evaluators should consider the duration, intensity, and psychological impact of the experience of coercive control on the victim when assessing culpability. It can have gone on for a life time.
- Expert testimony should contextualize the event as trauma-driven survival behavior, not a fit of rage.

This recognition moves beyond pathology and toward forensic comprehension of entrapment and trauma, essential for fair adjudication in cases involving victims of coercive control (Stark, 2023).

6. Understanding Perceived 'Overreaction' and Injury to Abusers

In some cases, women who have endured prolonged coercive control may inflict significant or fatal injury on their abusers, leading observers to perceive their reaction as excessive or 'overreaction.' Forensically, these acts are better understood as cumulative trauma responses rather than impulsive rage or vengeance. Victims of long-term abuse often live in a state of hyperarousal where the brain's survival system is chronically activated. The amygdala becomes hypersensitive, and the prefrontal cortex, responsible for rational judgment, is suppressed under prolonged threat. Consequently, when the abuser escalates or even gestures toward aggression, the victim's nervous system reacts as though a life-threatening event is imminent.

What appears to outsiders as disproportionate force is, in fact, a reaction proportionate to the accumulated – cumulative - trauma and perceived total threat. This behavior aligns with what forensic specialists' term reactive survival aggression, behavior driven by conditioned fear, cumulative despair, and the perceived absence of any safe alternative or escape.

When assessing these cases, judicial professionals should be aware that what seems like 'overreaction' is often an act of last resort within the context of ongoing captivity and coercion.

Summary

Women who kill their abusers after enduring coercive control do not 'snap.' They respond, after years of degradation, with minds shaped by trauma, and bodies conditioned to survive.

About the author

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