

MODEL 2 – For the *Soul to Soul* Category

Stop Fighting FOR Your Abuser

By XXX

Childhood for me consisted of roughhousing with my brother, getting mani-pedis with my mom, and playing Barbies with my dad. Taylor Swift was my idol and her album *Fearless* soundtrack my life. Being with family meant riding bikes to the beach and dinners of roasted chicken with green beans. All I knew at the age of eight was pure joy.

My mom was my ultimate role model, my brother my built-in best friend, and my dad my protector. We were one big happy family—until we weren't. Late in the school year of second grade, my mom told me she had breast cancer. For the first time, I knew heartbreak and fear. Shortly after her first surgery and the start of chemotherapy, my dad cheated on her. By then, I had already celebrated my tenth birthday and was old enough to understand what that meant. Fast forward to the first month of sixth grade; my mom had won her battle with cancer. And she left my dad.

Throughout middle school, my father morphed into a man I no longer recognized. The man who watched *Spongebob Squarepants* with me every morning and made me bowls of oatmeal transformed into an angry, bitter, and inconsolable monster. The emotional abuse he put me through yanked me from my baby pink childhood and hurled me into the darkest place of my life. He would threaten to hit me or my brother if I said something that reminded him of my mom. He would kick me out of the house and block my number if I put up a fight. Originally, my parents had shared custody, but that did not last long. For a while, I refused to go to my dad's house but didn't tell my mom why. The fear of my dad getting in trouble was enough to silence me; that was how much I loved him.

One day, my dad was crying on the couch and I tried to comfort him. I asked as gently as possible if he were OK. I hated seeing his tears. He was supposed to be my rock. "No," he spat at me. "I am not okay." He turned to me, stood up, puffed out his chest and straightened his shoulders. The way he looked down at me with swollen eyes and a red face made me feel smaller than a grain of sand. "You could've stopped her! You could've made her stay! This is all your fault!" He stormed into his bedroom. I called my mom and told her I needed her to come get me and take me far away from my dad. That night, I finally told her everything.

Throughout middle school and most of high school, my father and I had a rocky relationship. While I was in therapy, I kept trying to piece our relationship back together, hoping to get back the person my father used to be. But I could never make it work. By the end of my junior year, I realized how detrimental my father's constant abuse was to my mental health.

Together, we had undergone several fruitless therapy sessions. My therapist diagnosed him with Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). People with BPD exhibit symptoms such as "emotional instability, feelings of worthlessness, insecurity, impulsivity, and impaired social relationships" (Mayo Clinic). The diagnosis made perfect sense, but he refused to get help. BPD causes moods to change drastically and very quickly. One minute my dad would be kind and caring and the

next he'd be hateful and angry. The constant toxicity of the past six years had built up to the point where my mental health suffered and I needed to leave school briefly. I had to cut communication with him and that would be hard.

The last time I saw my father, we had gone out to dinner. I shared with him my plan to travel to Washington with my mom for my eighteenth birthday. He requested that I include him in the trip. I politely refused. That's when he lost control. My dad had the worst episode of BPD that I had ever witnessed, starting in the restaurant and continuing until he dropped me off at my mom's apartment. He accused me of excluding him from my life and yet he went on to say how much of a burden I was—a clear sign that a manic episode was beginning. One moment he begged me to forgive him for everything and the next he was telling me to get out of his life and never speak to him again.

In that moment, I realized that there was nothing I could do, and no matter how much he said he loved me, he would not change. That was the catalyst that caused me to cut off all forms of contact. The trauma he caused forced me to give up on him. Years of being torn down by a man I hardly knew left me scarred but stronger than I had ever been.

Many people ask why I put up with my father for so long. "Your mom takes care of you on her own, anyway," they'd say. "So why do you keep wasting time on your dad?" And although I knew they meant well, that wasn't actually a fair question. I knew my dad suffered from a mental illness and was a cancerous part of my life, but he was still my father. When I saw him, I remembered the dad who played Barbies and let me give him makeovers. The emotional and verbal abuse was never the hardest part. Giving up and letting him go was.

I mourned the loss, but I was glad to move on. It was never my job to heal my father or to heal our relationship. He was an adult and he failed me. It may not have been the best choice for everyone, but it gave me my freedom. I could finally put the energy I was wasting on trying to fix him into piecing myself back together. I sorted through all my past traumas and then I reassured myself that no matter what my dad had done, I am—and will always be—a strong individual deserving of good things. Every day presents a new battle, but I keep fighting for myself.

It's getting close to a year without my dad and I'm doing better than ever. I know that every case of abuse is different and I am privileged to have had the opportunity to go to therapy for so many years. I am also very fortunate to have a strong mom who has always supported my decisions. She raised and protected me when my dad no longer could. No matter how much I loved him or how often he said he loved me, the abuse never stopped; it only ended when I realized that it wasn't him I needed to love; it was myself. Once I began choosing myself over him, life got better.

If you are facing a similar situation, choose to make yourself a priority. Put your needs before anyone else's, so you can stop fighting for your abuser and start fighting for yourself.

Work Cited

“Borderline Personality Disorder.” *Mayo Clinic*, Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, 17 July 2019, www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/borderline-personality-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20370237. Accessed 17 May 2020.