

So You've Been Accused Of Abuse

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A friend asked me for advice in dealing with an accusation of abuse and so I wrote a little guide with input from half a dozen feminists of differing perspectives that I admire...

First off you need to take one hell of a step back and try to remember the bigger picture. We are limited creatures, it is easy to self-delude or miss things while still perceiving ourselves as intensely rational and our experience as more objectively accurate. The effect of human cognitive biases not to mention subjective constraints is huge. It may be humiliating to think of yourself in terms of statistics among a much wider category of humans, but it can be a useful corrective. If you weren't yourself, if you ignore your internal narrative and memories, if you saw someone else in this situation, with these objective or discernible facts, what would you assume? What possibilities would you have to consider about that person?

I am not advocating gaslighting yourself but pausing and breathing and getting a broader perspective – recognizing at the very least the possibility of your own fallibility on really seemingly concrete things.

The second thing is to truly try to listen to the accuser. Yes, they *could* be somewhat dishonest or disconnected from reality, but 1) it is always possible that someone's wildly different experiences or narratives are more true than your own, however diligent and sincere you are, 2) even regardless of that you should very seriously consider the very likely possibility in which the experiences and perspectives they describe are honest and sincere.

That should be horrifying. If you are a remotely decent person you should be able to put aside your defensiveness and fear of consequences or of being manipulated for a moment and truly feel their stated pain and experience. The prospect that you've hurt someone should hurt, but it should not cripple you with fear so that you run away from it.

The prospect of having done great harm also shouldn't cripple you with the cheap path of self-recrimination. Harming yourself isn't the same as paying penance, guilt and self-punishment are not productive. Those instincts are about making you feel like you're doing something productive, to absolve you by retreat to some simple flavor of misery, this is not the same thing as making things better.

Additionally our shitty monkey brains will race to deflect, to say "X is not real" or "X is eclipsed by", but right now, in your own head, you are NOT a lawyer before a jury desperately trying to get your client off. There is no audience but yourself, and you owe yourself truth, the most accurate picture of all the possibilities.

This is the point where it's worth examining the individual actions you took, the raw physical facts, stripped of your narratives. There's too many cases for me to list here, but a large number of actions are pretty much just inherently abusive. If, for example, you hit your partner then *you hit your partner*. Why becomes a side issue. It cannot eclipse that. It's worth itemizing the specific actions you are accused of and reading up on them, one by one. Again, ignoring the explanations you have, the context you think is more relevant. Did you, for example, yell? Did you touch your date without consent? Did you guilt her for seeing other friends? With each accused action, stop. Pause. Consider the general case. Read what people have written about it. Whatever the context you feel is extenuating, little green aliens didn't descend and force you to do what you did.

Yes, the other person may have done abusive things too. We will get to that. But this isn't a scale. Their abuse don't invalidate or eclipse your abuse. Each must be addressed separately. And you will never grasp or measure all that has been done accurately if you're trying to *compare* rather than evaluate each thing unto itself. Put off crafting your defensive narratives and rhetorical strategies for a moment, you owe yourself the truth first.

Next you need to grapple with your values. What is your goal here?

If your primary goal is to get off scott free of consequences, to triangulate back, to "win" or secure for yourself power and standing then this piece is not for you, and I gotta tell you, attempting to pretend and follow along is probably not going to go well for you in the long run. But if you're compassionate and altruistic, if your primary goal is to do right by everyone, to leave the world better off, then there's gonna be some sacrifices. Also – and this is important – you're not going to be the one to determine how much. Personal consequences are not a price that you're haggling.

Other people have a lot of rights that you have no say in. One of those rights is to stop being friends with you. Another is the right of people to tell their personal experience, forever. Even if you disagree with it. Even if it's "objectively wrong".

The loss of a friend, nevermind a partner or an entire community, is an incredible unbelievable pain. Our monkey brains are unfortunately wired to treat it as worse than the loss of a limb. But if you truly care about other people as people, rather than sources of pleasure or comfort for you, then you care about their freedom. And if they don't have the freedom to disassociate or speak their story they have no freedom at all.

These are not freedoms that you can contractually negotiate with them, they are not freedoms that you should ever try to pressure against. Letting other people have agency is sometimes quite painful. They will sometimes make choices that hurt you or are misguided. That is our burden to bear. Ethics is not a game of legalistic "fairness", ethics is about stepping up and shouldering certain burdens, certain unbelievable pains, so that everyone can be free.

It is of course important to also self-advocate. Compassion and goodwill *can* be taken advantage of. Intentional abusers can and will find those who are particularly empathetic and try to take advantage of them. Sometimes accusations of abuse will be projected to cover worse abuse. In some communities where abuse is treated seriously there can be a strategic "first-accuser advantage". Some of these effective strategies can be adopted and replicated by abusers even without their conscious awareness of that.

There are also some clearcut situations where the power dynamic is overwhelming and obvious, like where one party controls an overwhelming degree of the other person's life. A parent accusing a child of abuse, a prison guard accusing an inmate of abuse, a partner who entirely controls their partner's finances and social life, doesn't let them out, etc, accusing them of abuse.

We have to use our eyes and common sense when a person with intense power accuses another. The parent, prison guard, or materially controlling partner may indeed feel pain, may indeed sincerely suffer emotionally, but that does not invalidate the very real and pressing power they wield.

You do not have an obligation to weigh the perspective of your accuser more heavily than your own perspective. You are certainly not obliged to let them cut you off from objective reality.

But it is important to err on the side of altruism.

This does not mean a “little concession” or a “little pain” from you, sometimes it can mean a fucking lot. Erring on the side of altruism can mean considering a world where the other person isn’t a total liar or brainwashed patsy trying to get you. And then oh shit.

This is not a negotiation where each person’s discomfort is weighed against the other’s. Sometimes to get things right you may have to undergo a lot more discomfort than you caused.

Accountability is lifelong. This is what our lives are about. Being accountable for our actions. *Anarchism means infinite responsibility, not less.*

Part of what this obliges is never running from your past, never papering it over or trying to get back to some kind of unspoiled prehistory. At the very least in the case of sexual or partner abuse you will have to tell this story to everyone you are interested in dating forever. *Forever.*

Accountability means being accountable to the person you harmed and to everyone else. But – and here’s a very important point – it damn well means you should listen attentively to the person you hurt.

You need to take a hell of a step back, but if communication is possible then you should try to communicate with the person you harmed. Good communication is a book unto itself, but one major check to see if things have gone wrong is whether you’re truly waiting and considering what the other person has said, rather than immediately formulating a response. Another important note about good communication – you can’t force it, forcing it makes it bad. Especially when this involves unilaterally barraging them with lots of contact or very dense and long writing. Communication requires checking in about how you’re communicating, or at least paying close attention to how the other person responds. Read some stuff on it, especially if your communication style was an avenue of abuse, but remember there is no magic formula, you still have to be vigilant in your consideration of them.

There’s a very real chance the person you harmed will not want to communicate with you, and that is their right. In which case you will have to balance between inferring their wishes and not making waves for them. Just because someone doesn’t want to spread shit about you doesn’t mean you don’t have serious work to do on your own. And it doesn’t mean that some measure of “I’ve been accused of ___ abuse” isn’t called for, even if you have to avoid deanonymizing details or context.

But if they’re willing to communicate, through a friend or whatever, it’s really important to let them. Abusing someone and then immediately jumping online to tell the whole world about how you abused them can be just continuing the abuse. You should very highly consider their wishes in how, with what detail and whether you talk about this accusation of abuse with others.

Similarly, going off and “putting yourself through accountability” is an empty misdirection if the survivor’s wishes and perspective isn’t also directly determining your accountability. While broader friends and associates can – and sometimes should – be involved, this shouldn’t happen in a way that marginalizes, impedes, or provides barriers to the survivor’s input and leadership. This does not necessarily mean them sharing a room with you or directly talking to you, but it

also shouldn't mean friends acting as go betweens in a way that impedes the survivor's voice or has them act as authorities or interfering mediators. If you're mobilizing a crew of friends to set up an "accountability process" for you that insulates you from the survivor and allows your buds to craft a different narrative... you're being a shit and a lot of folks will know what's up.

Depending on the scale and nature of the abuse some baseline shit they might require from you would be some functional restraining orders, mediation, counseling, studying, restraint from certain behaviors like drinking, yelling at people, hitting up tinder, participating in certain orgs, or wielding institutional power... It's gonna get complicated.

It's very much worth noting here that anarchists and radicals are generally not trained psychologists and that ad hoc off-the-cuffs attempts by laymen to grapple with someone's thought processes, frames, habits, baggage, etc, are not going to have a strong success rate. While you shouldn't replace or overrule the needs and directions of those at risk and who you harmed, getting a legit therapist too isn't a bad idea. But this isn't a fucking ride you can passively sit on, you need to be active, you need to be looking for ways to help and find effective avenues for personal growth.

You have a lot of obligations to yourself and to other people, to challenge yourself, to learn and demonstrably grow. These obligations exist regardless. But such obligations don't overshadow or replace what the person you harmed may need from you.

Again, when there's mutual abuse you should try to focus on each side separately. This is just a guide for the part about your abuse.

And EVEN IF the person accusing you of abuse is in fact indisputably an opportunistic liar attempting some social game or power play, you still have a responsibility to everyone else as well. You don't want to respond in a way that plays into noxious narratives and habits in our dominant society. This is an opportunity for you to demonstrate a better path than shit like the "she's just a crazy bitch" or "yeah well here's my counter-story so" responses everyone defaults on. This means measured responses and recognizing that a lot of people are going to want less to do with you. Taking shit seriously means being attentive of the seriousness of the situation, not merely in terms of the seriousness in your personal life or reputation, but how your responses will have externalities, how it will affect numerous bystanders. Because even IF you're that occasional person accused dishonestly, a selfishly reactive – whether hamfisted or cloying – response can do damage to actual survivors.

If the accuser is in fact disingenuous and an abuser themselves then chances are they won't be able to hide that over time. If the accuser is a drive-by anonymous troll on the internet with intimate knowledge or connection, people will see that and recognize the disconnect, and the troll will be incapable of doing more. But if you truly think they're so brilliant at manipulation and deception that truth will never win out, stop trying to fight them for your reputation and get away. You've already lost, escape is better than a prolonged war or life under their boot. You still owe people nuanced honesty, but this isn't a fight you can win.

People's values tend to shine through over time. If you are sincere and take time to learn the warning signs of manipulators and abusers you won't have a similar problem ever again, whereas they will have the inverse midas touch – turning everything to shit wherever they go.

And if the person accusing you was sincere, and you in turn seriously and sincerely engage with your actions, the survivor and the community, any actual development and change on your part will eventually shine through.

If the survivor is okay with you writing a public statement let them review what you've written before you publish it. (And don't pull some bullshit where your official statement is spotless but then you run your mouth to people in different ways at other points.) If the survivor wants to take lead in accountability this is a place where they can provide a lot of feedback. If a survivor does not want to communicate with you at all it can be worthwhile to still write a statement to inform the people around you, but be sure to avoid details that would directly identify the survivor. If on the off chance the accusations are entirely false and there's no way even under the most charitable read that the accuser is anything but intentionally deceitful and would turn accountability into abuse, you can write something without getting their approval but it should take a charitable form.

Here's what a public response should look like:

1. Give a content warning. Name what you've been accused of. You can mention how the prospect of having hurt someone horrifies you, how you wish to make reparations or whatever, but don't center things on you. This should not be longer than two paragraphs at the absolute most. This is the place to say that you understand your friends that need to distance or cease trusting you.
2. Provide links to or direct and whole quotations to the accusations in their own words. Do not fucking paraphrase. You will want to paraphrase, do not.
3. IF you have proof – clearcut receipts – that your accuser is lying on a thing, then by all means provide it here, but in short form that doesn't turn the entire statement into a series of protestations (if need be just link to a dump of annotated pics externally). Note that this ABSOLUTELY does not mean hazy shit “well how could it have been sexual abuse if she texted me later in cheery tone the same day?” This means something like plane tickets and pics of you out of town with people on the dates of the event accused, that level of clear cut.
4. Now you can tell your perception of things, but be clear to use “at the time I felt” sort of language. Again, this should try to be short and concise. If there's any remote chance the accuser isn't consciously maliciously dishonest this is not a space for excuses or wheedling but for a brief autopsy. The intention should be to better inform other people so that they can have more agency, not to build your case in the court of public opinion. That difference is really sharply apparent. If you have the wrong intentions they will leak through quite evidently to a lot of us. Even when your case is sound that the other person is 100% wrong, if you present it in the wrong tone and frame you risk doing more harm than good.
5. Finally, this is the place where you should write your action plan, all the things you are doing, people who have agreed to be contacted in what contexts, the survivor's wishes, etc.

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