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Confronting PTSD in The Aftermath of Abuse

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But I’m Not a Victim: Confronting PTSD in The Aftermath of Abuse

Ayla A. Bilyeu

Advised by Dr. Jennifer E. McCabe
Forward From the Author

This narrative is the cumulation of research on the PTSD responses of women in heterosexual, romantic relationships. During an exploration of the literature, I uncovered innumerable dimensions of romantic abuse. This narrative aims to hone in on the symptomatic dimension of abuse and expand on the individual experience rather than the statistical.

PTSD was one of the most common threads connecting the literature on romantic abuse. It was a diagnosis that was often used as an umbrella for a significant array of symptoms expressed by female victims. These victims tended to underreport the impacts of their experiences and were reluctant to accept their diagnoses.

This narrative follows a young woman who experienced such romantic abuse over the course of seven clinical sessions with a new psychiatrist. Her experiences and inner monologue were derived from research I conducted and treated with as much respect and sensitivity as possible. While her experiences will not encapsulate all dynamics of romantic abuse or be representative of any single individual, she is a character designed to shine a light on the propensity of psychological and emotional violence that women face as well as their obstacles in recovery.
Session One: September 2nd

“I think it’s best if you’re honest with me, Miss Newhart.”

I twisted my lips between my teeth and debated bolting out of the room. I looked at the pale-yellow door, painted with faded flowers and anthropomorphized dogs. As dreary as that door looked, it was my haven in this moment. I wanted to run for it, throw the door open, and flee into the rain.

The old church where Dr. Bennet decided to set up her practice five years ago was all faded colors and dim lighting. Even here in the basement. She told me all about her choice to work out of a church when we had our phone interview last week. Apparently, the in-patient mental health clinic she used to work at for twenty years prior was too sterile and “soulless.” What was the opposite of soulless? Well, to Dr. Bennet, it was Jesus.

I tried to take my eyes off the door. There was plenty to look at in the oversized office. Dr. Bennet was in her seventies and her office reflected that. Knitted Afghans and pillow covers covered the furniture while dusty books lined the edges of the walls. Each of the half dozen lamps had a different color lampshade. Dr. Bennet’s armchair nearly swallowed her and partially blocked the sun-damaged Thomas Kinkade painting on the wall behind her.

This was my third attempt at finding a therapist. I’d given up searching last year when I started to feel like just another number. It was at Mom’s demand that I try one more time. She threatened my tuition if I refused. So, I searched for the most unassuming therapist I could find. I just had to get through a few sessions with Dr. Bennet before I could leave this mess in my past for good. This little old lady couldn’t be nearly as domineering as the last one or half as cocky as the first one.

“I’m only ever honest,” I say more sharply than I should. I would have been softer to the woman but she plucked a nerve.

Dr. Bennet nodded, ignoring my tone. “Good. Then why don’t you tell me about your sister?”

I blinked. Alyce isn’t why I’m here. “She’s good, I suppose. Three years younger than me. She’s graduating high school this year and while we bicker here and there, I think we get along well.”

Dr. Bennet kept her eyes on me but moved her pen over her notebook while I spoke. “Are you close?”

I nodded. “Closer than most. But I think it’s just because my family is close in general.”

Alyce and I didn’t share a lot in common nor did we enjoy much of the same things, but we spent a lot of time together with Mom and Dad. If it wasn’t for our DNA, we probably never would have crossed paths.

“-here today?”
I swallowed. I’d been staring right at Dr. Bennet, but I hadn’t heard a word she said.

She seemed to notice and repeated her question. “Does your sister know that you’re here today?”

I was a bit annoyed with the psychiatrist’s line of questioning. We weren’t here to talk about Alyce. She didn’t even know about the reason I was here.

“No.”

Dr. Bennet nodded and continued scrawling with her pen. I couldn’t tell if she was writing words or drawing pictures.

The seconds ticked by on a clock somewhere I couldn’t see. Tick, tick, tick. The near silence made me increasingly uneasy. Only fifty-five more minutes.

“Now tell me some more about what you’re going to school for.”

My first appointment with Dr. Bennet was as useless as I had predicted. She spent the entire hour asking questions she could have gotten off my intake form. If it was some Mr. Miyagi thing then so be it but I really didn’t think so.

She hadn’t asked me a word about Aiden. Not a damn word. I knew she read my notes from the hospital and the previous two psychiatrists. Dr. Bennet was well aware of why I was there but never mentioned it. What a waste of money. At least, a waste of my insurance company’s money.

I resolved to ask her about it next week. I didn’t take her for the type of psychiatrist to attempt to make you like her by playing it cool and slyly making you like her just in time to drop a bomb of profundity on you.

**Session 2: September 9th**

“How was your day?” Dr. Bennet asked.

Her office was brighter today. Last week’s rain had pounded through the weekend but finally let up in time to celebrate the last vestiges of summer warmth.

The sun was gleaming rainbow through the many multicolored scarves hung up to block the windows. It was comforting to sit in the diluted light. My place on the faded couch had been warm before I even sat down, and the exposed skin of my legs could already feel the heat.

“Fine,” I said. “I have a question for you though.”

Dr. Bennet raised a single eyebrow at me.

I continued. “What are you writing? I spoke for an hour about nothing last week, yet you had a pen in your hand the whole time. I didn’t say anything that you couldn’t glean from my intake form.”

The elderly woman took a breath and turned her notebook around. On the page was a drawing of a cityscape. It was so detailed that even from my place on
the couch I could have sworn it was printed. It was completely black and white with soaring buildings and tiny people walking in the streets. The image was beautiful.

“You’re right, Miss Newhart. You spoke about nothing last week.” Dr. Bennet returned the notebook to her lap and clicked the pen closed on her knee. “I figured I’d just work on my art while you were here. No point in wasting both of our time.”

I was shocked. Annoyed. I’d been prepared for just about any pretentious answer about analyzing my psyche, but this was not what I was expecting. “What do you mean wasting our time?”

The psychiatrist gave me a wry, knowing stare. “Answer me honestly here. Would you be here if it weren’t for your mother’s bribe? Will you put in the effort to confront what that boy did to you? What he made you?”

“He didn’t make me anything,” I deadpanned. I ignored the part where Mom must have told her about the bribe and let all of my periphery fade away. I stared with as much venom as I could muster at the woman in the chair. *He didn’t make me anything.*

“Ah.” Dr. Bennet leaned back. “But he did. He made you afraid. He made you angry. He made you sick. He made you a victim.”

“I’m not a victim.” I felt my fist ball under my sun-warmed legs.

Dr. Bennet didn’t let up. “Oh, but you are. He made you into something he could control.”

I attempted to close my mouth and clench my teeth but failed. My jaw remained open as I tried to figure out if Dr. Bennet had just violated some kind of ethical code. Would she care if she did?

“Andie,” she said, softer this time, “I know you’re here to get this phase over with, but it will not be over until you deal with it.”

I blinked back the burning behind my eyes. “What does ‘dealing with it’ look like to you? Because I’ve been dealing with it every day for a year already.”

Dr. Bennet considered. “I would like to start by learning more about the relationship. I understand you have known each other for a long time. I can’t imagine how it felt to realize what he was doing to you.”

The echoing feeling of pangs in my stomach rose. I felt as if I was starving suddenly. I felt like I had to run, run, run. My skin was tight on my bones and the world suddenly appeared dimmer as if the scarves in the church basement had been replaced with wooden boards.

I fought my instinct. I fought to defend him. She didn’t know how much pain he was in. She didn’t know the demons that haunted him. Dr. Bennet just saw the worst. She would dehumanize him, villainize him. She would denounce the person who loved me so much it almost killed him.
I knew she wouldn’t be pleased with me defending him. She wouldn’t listen. She wouldn’t want to.

“I’m sorry,” Dr. Bennet said.

I looked at her through watery eyes.

“I don’t mean to force you in a place of defense. I should have chosen my words more carefully. I’m not trying to goad you anymore.”

The bewilderment at her apology must have shown on my face because the doctor started speaking again. “I’ve been around a long time, Andie. I know when a patient is willing to be helped and when they’re not. I know what buttons to push and the reactions they’ll elicit. I am familiar with the burden you carry, and I hope you’ll share what it feels like with me.”

Dr. Bennet had admitted to goading me. She apologized and showed her hand. She was good because it was working. I was starting to trust her. Maybe it was her wrinkled blue eyes, highlighted by her navy blouse that drew me in but I suddenly wanted to tell her about the pain that had taken up residence in my gut. If any professional was going to help, Dr. Bennet was probably it.

“It feels like I’ll throw up if I eat anything,” I said softly, testing the waters.

She smiled sadly. “Thus, your weight declined.”

Her statement was posed like a question, so I nodded. “It came on fast. I hadn’t even realized until I couldn’t wear my own jeans anymore. At first, I was glad to drop some weight, but it got a lot worse. People started to notice.”

“How often did you throw up?”

I took a breath deep enough to make a small pop in my back. No one knew. No one. Not even Aiden. “Every day,” I whispered.

Dr. Bennet nodded but kept her pen still as if she could remember everything I would tell her without even trying. “I’m sorry, my dear. I’m sorry you’re going through that.”

Going through that. Not, went through that.

I waited for her surprise or her instructions. I waited for what I expected but it never came. Instead, she remained silent.

“I’m hungry. I can muscle down some crackers sometimes but I can’t tell you how much I want more than just one or two.”

Like a good physiatrist, Dr. Bennet let the silence continue and like a good patient, I filled it. “I don’t know why.”

“You make it sound like you’re admitting to a great sin,” she noted with a taste of sarcasm.

I offered a knowing curve of my upper lip. “Are you leading me somewhere?” I asked.

Dr. Bennet matched my expression, “Of course, I am.”
I looked down at my lap and let the ticks of that mystery clock wash over me, ground me. I didn’t know if I wanted to know her answer to my next question, but I couldn’t resist asking it. “Where are you leading me to?”

“If I told you that, I might as well have not led you there at all.”

I used to think that clinicians kept their cards close to their chest, so we’d keep coming back and spending money. Like highly trained psychics.

Dr. Bennet was doing the same, but she certainly wasn’t being shy about it.

**Session 3: September 16th**

Dr. Bennet had forgone her notepad today.

“Bold,” I said nodding at her empty lap.

She smiled. “I figured you would be more willing to talk today. Am I correct?”

Dr. Bennet’s directness was far more comforting than I would have expected. Her greying hair was down in ringlets today, echoing the softness in her face.

“Probably,” I smiled. “Depends on your questions, I guess.”

My challenge landed and Dr. Bennet crossed her ankles, making herself comfortable. “All right then.”

Today was all about the triggers. She wanted to know what I felt like when I heard my phone chime or when I smelled that cheap cologne that was once like a drug to me. I told her about the gut-hollowing pangs in my stomach. The shaking. The vomiting.

It wasn’t about the sounds or smells that got to me. When they came from him, they were something else entirely. They were comfort and swooning. Then they were fear and hurt.

Aiden texted me at least once every waking hour for well over a year. He wanted to tell me wonderful things, worrying things, and horrible things. If I ever missed a message or didn’t respond in time he would call and call and call. He used to call my family and friends. He’d eventually track me down and there were no number of apologies I could make for his fear of not being able to reach me.

But he had autism. It mixed with his anxiety in a way so terrible he couldn’t stand it sometimes. His fears spiraled the longer I was out of reach. I knew that and I would leave my phone far away or even forget it entirely. He’d fear where I was, who I was with, if I was okay. He knew me when I was in the car accident when we were kids and never felt comfortable with me driving anywhere after that. I knew it all and I drove anyway.
Dr. Bennet nodded along without objecting to my statements today. She would listen with sympathy but did not contradict me where previous psychiatrists had.

The others would try to soothe me, tell me it wasn’t my job to cater to his idiosyncrasies. They would shake their heads when I told them how awful I felt for exacerbating his problems. Of course, I knew why they said those things, I even agreed. But it wouldn’t change a damn thing. It couldn’t unmake what happened. There was nothing that could.

And I wouldn’t want it to.

Session 4: September 23rd

“I was pissed!” I yelled. “I couldn’t even kiss this guy because all I could picture was Aiden’s anger. I had a panic attack on his living room floor. Who does that?” I dug my fingers through my scalp and made to stand. I needed to walk.

Move. My skin was getting tighter and tighter.

Dr. Bennet allowed me the space to walk and breathe. God, I was breathing hard. Too hard. I was about to choke on all the air in my lungs.

I stopped in front of the shaded windows and tried to breathe through pursed lips as I leaned against an overflowing bookshelf.

My eyes were suddenly stinging, and I was acutely aware that I was about to cry. No. I wasn’t. I wasn’t going to.

“Still think he didn’t mess you up?” Dr. Bennet tossed over her shoulder.

I looked up to the back of her head. And laughed. Where my grating breaths were a moment ago was now replaced with laughter.

“Okay,” I conceded. “Maybe he did.”

I saw Dr. Bennet’s shoulders lift in light laughter as well. I glance back at the floor and take a few more breaths before returning to my chair. The psychiatrist looked at me proudly and with the tender care of a grandmother.

“Would that be your first time admitting that?” she asked.

I nestled down and leaned back into the ratty pillow behind me. “I think you know the answer to that.”

Our conversations had become significantly more casual now. Much was said with wrinkling of eyebrows and furrowing of mouths. I had to concede respect for Dr. Bennet’s methods. She was surprisingly in tune with the things left unsaid. I never felt like I had to explain why. I never needed excuses for the things I did for Aiden. She never challenged me on them and allowed me the space to process my role in the decline.

“I think the panic attacks will be okay soon,” she considered. “They’re awful to be sure but due to their episodic nature, I think they’ll continue decreasing in frequency.”
I nodded. I felt the same way. I didn’t need the medication or the meditation techniques. I didn’t need to avoid men or attend support groups. I didn’t want any of it and Dr. Bennet had been the only one to listen to me on that.

“Howver, the chronic stress does concern me.”

I knew that was coming.

“Aiden hasn’t been in your life for some time now but the effects are more prominent than I would hope for.”

“So what are your suggestions?”

Dr. Bennet twisted her mouth, and I clenched my teeth in response. She only did that when she was firing up to say something she knew I wouldn’t like.

“I would like to discuss Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder with you.”

It would be four months until I went back to Dr. Bennet.

**Session 5: January 12**

“I’m pleased to see you back here.”

I tried not to look guilty or embarrassed under Dr. Bennet’s gaze. After the abrupt end to our session in the Fall, I had not returned. Dr. Bennet seemed to expect as much because her receptionist in the church basement never called to confirm our next appointment or even to reschedule when I no-showed.

I made it through the rest of the Fall without much incident and even started eating a little more. It all came crashing down when Alyce brought Aiden’s brother home over Thanksgiving break to work on a senior school project. The second I saw Kyle’s face I saw Aiden’s. I saw the fear, and the anger, and the love.

It was too much, and I excused myself to my childhood bedroom. Mom hadn’t cleaned it out yet and every item in the room reminded me of when I met Aiden, when I fell in love with him. It was suffocating.

Before the night was out, I had my bags packed and loaded in the car. I still had two more days at home until I was supposed to leave but I couldn’t do it.

Afterward, I got a message from Aiden.

Kyle had told him everything and he wanted to know if I was okay. He wanted to soothe the wound he’d created. I nearly hyperventilated.

Aiden’s phone number had been blocked on my phone for months but somehow, he always made it through when he really wanted to. I knew what it was, and I knew he was trying to assert whatever lingering control he could but after all this time his comfort felt so, so good. It was a familiar blanket wrapping around my shoulders and a cool salve on a terrible burn.

Denying him was impossible. But I did. And I paid for it. He reminded me of my own damage and what I caused when I didn’t answer him.
His mother had turned against him when I told her what was happening. She didn’t even know what he did to me, but I told her what he was doing to himself. She demanded he admit himself to a psychiatric facility and even began filing the paperwork so a judge could force him to.

Tammy did everything she could to protect her son, but Aiden felt betrayed and lied to. He barely spoke to his mother anymore and credited my interference for their separation. He said he had spent his whole life carefully crafting an image of himself that wouldn’t make his mother worry or strain their relationship, and I had ruined it.

It has never mattered how much I tell myself that I did the right thing by telling Tammy, I still feel responsible for blowing a hole in his mother’s life and her relationship with her son.

“I’m sorry for how I acted in September,” I said quietly, clearing my throat. “I don’t think I was ready to hear that.”

It was true. When Dr. Bennet started discussing PTSD, I instantly went on the defense. I knew I had anxiety and one doctor had even tried diagnosing me with depression, but PTSD was too out there. Too much.

PTSD was what veterans came home with after experiencing the very limits of horror. It was what caused my great uncle to soundproof his tornado shelter and retreat there twice a year for several days. It wasn’t what middle-class white girls got from a bad break-up.

Dr. Bennet seemed to know exactly what I was thinking in September and didn’t try to fight me on it. She let me leave and brood in my thoughts for the next four months.

And brood in those thoughts I did. I was able to push the idea of PTSD from my mind until I saw Kyle and received the messages from Aiden. After that, I took to the internet and found the story of a woman who was diagnosed with PTSD after she left her abusive husband. Then another woman was diagnosed when her abusive boyfriend committed suicide. And another after that. They were everywhere. One after another the stories came, and the comments exploded. They were usually kind and most women commented that they had a similar experience.

When I reached the morning of my third day without being able to go to work or even eat, I called Dr. Bennet.

“I understand, Andie. And I appreciate your apology.” The psychiatrist smiled and continued. “I think it’s about time we revisited the topic. Why don’t you tell me why you made this appointment.”

I curled my lips in and bit down before speaking. I needed to get control of myself now before I got too far. The story came out in a long-winded rant. I started slowly and regaled the entire scene with Kyle and the subsequent texts from Aiden. I told her about my body’s reactions and my emotions after the fact. Dr. Bennet
seemed pleased with my level of detail and offered consoling glances while I spoke.

I tried to tell her everything calmly, but I could hear my voice shaking and my shoulders trembled unless I paused to force them still.

“How does he keep reaching you?”

I pulled my phone out of my purse and set it on the arm of my chair, staring at it. “Different ways. Sometimes he finds a new phone number. Sometimes he makes new emails and sometimes just online.”

Dr. Bennet nodded. “And your unwillingness to file for a protection order is due to…”?

I bit my cheek. “He never really threatened me. He hurt me but there’s no proof. I also want him to be able to reach me if it’s an emergency.”

“Why?” Dr. Bennet was using a more assertive tone than usual.

“If he’s about to do something, I can help him. I can stop him.”

“And why is that your responsibility?”

I forced my shoulders still again and took a deep breath. “Because he doesn’t listen to anyone else.”

Dr. Bennet remained stoic. “So?”

Her face didn’t give away what she wanted me to say. Her expression didn’t speak the way it normally did.

“I don’t…” Words failed me. I felt a little at a loss. “I don’t know, I just think if I can do something about it I should.”

“And what has it cost you?”

I rolled my lips in again and tried to quiet the swirling fog in my mind. “My sanity and his life aren’t comparable. I’m not interested in ranking value.”

“Why?” Dr. Bennet challenged. “Because you already have, I’m just asking you to reconsider it.”

I arched a brow. “What do you mean I already have?”

“Well,” Dr. Bennet took a deep breath, “The fact that you have not taken more efforts to block his contact or file for a protection order tells me that you have already valued his threats above your quality of life.”

So here was the tough love that Dr. Bennet had been saving up. Here was where the trust she crafted was tested.

She was right of course. I had done that. But who wouldn’t? If you had the chance to save someone from themselves, wouldn’t you?

“I suppose you have a point,” I muttered at the carpet.

“Of course I have a point. Now, I ask you, is your health, your life, your future worth that boy’s threats?”
The room suddenly felt smaller. I looked to the scarf-covered windows, but the dim clouds did little to illuminate my mood. “His threats? No. But if he tries to act on them again then it’s his life I’m weighing.”

Dr. Bennet nodded. “How many times has he tried?”

I twisted my mouth as the tears rose. They filled my vision, and I spent at least a hundred ticks of that hidden clock to clear them.

“Once. And before that, it was faked. I couldn’t tell by the end and the last time he was finally admitted.”

“How long was he in the hospital?”

I sniffed back against my running nose. “A few weeks.”

“And did you visit him?”

I nodded.

“How did it go?”

I shot up and started furiously rubbing my hands against my thighs. I was clenching my jaw so tight I thought my teeth might crack. My breath was desperate and accented with slight groans to keep my throat from closing up entirely.

“I can’t-”

Dr. Bennet leaned forward and reached for my hand. She pulled me to the floor and followed me down. She kept ahold of my hand and coached my breath. She inhaled deeply and encouraged me to follow.

I could feel tears leaking over my eyelashes and wished they weren’t such a clear symbol of my heartache. Of my confusion.

I loved Aiden more than I loved myself. Maybe even still. I was willing to give anything for him and he took it. He took it and twisted it and spit it back in my face. But I hurt him too. I walked away from someone who was suffering and hurt him deeply.

It didn’t matter how many secrets I kept for him or how much I covered the red marks on my arms. He was still more broken than I was, and I couldn’t push it. If I told our friends what happened when we were alone, I’d have destroyed his entire support system.

“Breathe, Andie. It’s only memory.”

I nodded though it felt like saying, breathe Andie, it’s only fire.

Dr. Bennet let me sit there on the floor for the rest of our hour. She asked questions and waited for muttered responses. She offered to call someone to drive me home, but I didn’t want to explain this to anyone.

I made another appointment with her before I left.
Session 6: January 19th

“Let’s talk coping strategies,” Dr. Bennet started. “I received your email about filing the order and I’m very proud of you for taking that step. I think it’s still important to have coping tools when Aiden himself isn’t the trigger.”

I agreed with her. Today was a good day, actually. Dr. Bennet had sent me some books on romantic PTSD and I finished them all within the week. Each addressed different aspects and individuals but all of them highlighted how challenging it was to accept PTSD in the wake of the relationship.

All the books emphasized that the act of acceptance is the key to reaching further recovery. It made sense. Each anecdote saw women struggling to admit the person she loved was capable of inflicting so much harm. The women often have defining moments of acceptance where they had to face the fact that they made the conscious decision to return and trust an abuser. It was what I wanted to talk to Dr. Bennet today about.

“I think I need something else first,” I said clearly.

Dr. Bennet brightened and nodded for me to continue.

“I read your books. I still can’t get my head around the blame part. I know that logically it’s his fault but it’s also up to me to say when enough is enough. Where’s the line? When is it my fault and when is it his fault?” I was waving my arms around as I spoke, hoping I was making sense.

Dr. Bennet didn’t seem to have any problems understanding me though. “If there was a straightforward answer to your question, I’d be out of the job.”

I snickered and refocused. “But really, how am I supposed to accept both victimhood and responsibility if I don’t even know what there is to accept?”

“Firstly, it is important to define what responsibility and victimhood mean to you. It won’t be the same for everyone. Additionally, part of moving forward means accepting things even if we do not fully understand them yet.”

I made a mental note of Dr. Bennet’s use of the word we but continued on.

“How do I do that?”

The psychiatrist shifted in her seat and considered her words before speaking again. For the first time, I noticed the slight pinch in the corners of her mouth and tiredness in her eyes. She looked her age for a moment, and I swear I saw memory flashing before her face.

“That is a wonderful question, Andie. If you ever figure out the answer, please let me know,” Dr. Bennet said seriously. “I can say that there are steps to get closer every day. Have you tried retroactive judgments?”

The rest of my session with Dr. Bennet was mostly strategies to come closer to acceptance. She coached my thinking and taught me how to start altering my thinking about Aiden and our time together.
She told me that she wanted me to practice this for several weeks before I came back. I was skeptical though. I didn’t want to waste my time on something that wouldn’t work. Not when I was this desperate.

**Session 7: March 1st**

Dr. Bennet was grinning from ear to ear as I told her about the last month and a half. Her suggestions were certainly helpful in the day-to-day moments, but I could tell she was more pleased with how I was speaking rather than what I was saying.

There was less tension in my stomach than ever before. I wasn’t fearless nor was I even remotely close to where I was before Aiden. But it was a step forward at least.

I felt like I could think about him now without wanting to run into traffic and even start teasing out the responsibility part.

“I’m glad you’re doing better. Did you ever reconnect with that boy you started seeing a few months ago?”

I smiled, instantly giving myself away.

“Oh, what fun!” Dr. Bennet clapped her hands together. “He seemed like a nice young man from what you told me. Is he understanding of your circumstance?”

“Actually, he is. Very much so. I told him the brief overview and he didn’t push or anything. He listened very similarly to you as a matter of fact.”

Dr. Bennet seemed once again pleased. “I’m grateful you’ve found someone in your personal life to support you so well.”

It was impossible to miss the reference she made to my intake form. I had been honest and reported that my family knew very little about what happened with Aiden. They knew it was a bad breakup and that I hadn’t taken it well, but I didn’t have the heart to tell them everything.

Somehow, telling Chase was easier. He was new. He’d seen my episode a few months ago when I had a panic attack at his house. I was sure I’d driven him away with that truckload of baggage, but he’d called me the next day to ask how I was doing. He wanted to help and offered to be an ear if I ever needed one. Someday he might be. I told him enough for now. Maybe somewhere down the road I’d tell him more. For now, I just wanted to enjoy it.

“So,” I said to Dr. Bennet. “What’s next?”
Author’s Note

The handling of Andie Newhart’s story was done with great care and evidence-based research in mind. She, like many women who have experienced romantic abuse, struggled to accept and understand her PTSD diagnosis. Additionally, she struggled to understand where the blame for such an experience lay. Many individuals report being blamed by their romantic partner for the abuse due to things beyond either’s control. Exacerbating mental illnesses and already strained relationships is a commonly reported form of emotional abuse.

This emotional abuse took front stage in Andie’s story though her internal monologue hints at physical abuse as well. It was my original intention to dive into several forms of abuse for this narrative however, during the research stage, it seemed like a large proportion of the victims who were diagnosed with PTSD cited elements of emotional, psychological, and spiritual abuse as the causes. To fully dive into the expanse of nuance in romantic abuse would likely require a different medium than this narrative.

The focus of this piece was less on providing a clinical perspective and more on the process of confronting such a diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Something to hold in mind as you think about this story is the thought process that Andie works through. She is only just beginning to process the guilt that was forced upon her for her own abuse. Her name and Aiden’s are composed of the same five letters, an intentional decision meant to highlight the building blocks we all share and how different the end result can be. Andie and Aiden also grew up near each other but ultimately treated each other very differently. These details are meant to undercut Andie inner monologue in order to emphasize the choice that lies in abusing an individual. Though both characters faced pain and mental struggles, Andie is the only one we see taking accountability for her actions by apologizing to Dr. Bennet.

So, what’s next? This is the question Andie asks Dr. Bennet at the end of her story. The narrative is so ended because that question remains open for every clinician, every patient, and every victim. Today, what mattered was confronting PTSD. Tomorrow? That’s another narrative.
References


_The Role of Shame, Anger, and Affect Regulation in Men’s Perpetration of Psychological Abuse in Dating Relationships_. (n.d.). https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260505278717