

real issues real answers

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# Terror Alert

Recognize Signs That Your Mate  
Is an Abuser

by chandra r. thomas

**I**t seemed like a perfect match. Carl Johnson\* was 29, tall, handsome, funny and single. Pam Smith was a year younger, a successful single mother, with a master's degree, searching for her soul mate. They'd met at a professional networking event in Washington, D.C. Three romantic dates later, Smith was hooked. "He was very attentive; he was very focused on me," says Smith, of Johnson, a construction supplies salesman. "He always put his best foot forward; he was intellectually stimulating. He'd exhibited all of the good qualities you'd expect to find in a good partner."

Their whirlwind romance seemed like a fairy tale come true until six months later, when on the eve of their wedding day his car ran out of gas while they were running errands. "I said something to him about it and he just went

berserk, yelling at me," Smith recalls. "It was frightening to see that level of anger. He kind of lunged at me like he was going to hit me."

He didn't that day and Smith, like millions of other women, brushed off her man's disturbing behavior, chalking it up to pre-wedding jitters. A week later, the demeaning comments and incessant criticism started; a month later the hitting began. "I realized he had a very controlling personality," she says. "Everything had to be the just the way he wanted in the house; I was shocked the first time he hit me. Each episode got increasingly more violent. He'd whip my behind one night; the next night it was like nothing had ever happened."

Yvas Witherspoon, a Birmingham, Alabama-based domestic violence counselor, says Johnson's story is all too common. "Most abusers start off very

charming. They literally sweep you off your feet," says Witherspoon, who teaches a court-mandated class for convicted abusers through Project Safe. "Eventually what you thought was love turns into possessiveness and extreme jealousy. They often try to isolate you from your family and friends. Another common sign is controlling who you talk to and trying to track where you are all of the time."

Smith toughed it out for six months, but ended up plotting her and her 10-year-old daughter's escape after Johnson drove her out to a wooded area one night and attempted to run her over with their car. Now a 50-something real estate company owner in Atlanta, she realizes she ignored many tell-tale signs. "Give the relationship time to develop so you can get to know the real person versus the 'representative,'" she says. "Don't ignore the signs. You can't change someone. If he hit you once he is likely to hit you again."

Witherspoon offers these tips for dealing with an abuser.

■ **Listen to your gut.** "Women tend to have a strong intuition; deep down we know when something isn't right," she says. "When you see that first red flag, get out early. Don't wait for things to escalate."

■ **Tell someone.** "A lot of women feel like they're alone, but you should always tell someone you trust what's going on. Call the police every time there is an incident because it's important to have documentation."

■ **Get counseling.** "Talking to a professional can help you get the strength to leave," she says. "It can also help you begin the healing process afterward. You need to talk to someone who understands. There are plenty of victim assistance classes available." ♥

*Chandra R. Thomas is an Atlanta writer.*

*\*Not his real name.*