

I have faced an emotionally abusive relationship in my life, and it left me feeling confused about my relationship towards the abuser, about my feelings afterward, and for how long it had been abusive. In talking with others who have faced emotionally abusive relationships, I have learned that this confusion does not reside in myself alone. In fact, it universally lies within others in emotionally, psychologically, physically and/or vocally abusive relationships.

To convey this, I created a video titled *xoxo, Alona*. The footage is meant to convey a dream-like quality, almost as if flashing back to the good parts of the relationship, but there's only one person on screen. I did this to convey a sense of self-love. This is not a flash-back, but a glance at the present moment. This character, Alona, loves herself now that she isn't in such an unhealthy relationship. Throughout, Alona reads a letter to her ex-girlfriend and abuser, Lilian. I used effects on the audio to make it a slightly distorted, and seem old. Almost as if no matter what Lilian says back, she can't change how she's effected Alona, she can't fix everything.

When watching my video, I want people to question relationships in their own lives, and how easily they may or may not forgive people.

Brienne K.
Maine

The Driver's Seat

Brie K.



All I could hear was my brother's muffled scream, my hands clenched tightly to either side of my head. They slowly slid off my ears, shaking haphazardly, jagged and uncontrolled. Fingers fumbled with my phone, shooting a messy text to Lilian. Lilian. My safe house when my actual house didn't feel all that safe.

I crept down the stairs, my feet dancing on the steps like they were made of ornate glass. As I got closer to the screaming match between my mom and my brother, my body slid closer and closer to the wall until my back was pinned to it. My saliva, heavy in my throat. I splayed my palms against the worn wallpaper, a desperate attempt to cool the sweat gathering on them. I pressed my ear to the door, separating myself from my family, listening for a pause in the conversation, for a calm tone, or a change of topic. Eventually, the conversation grew quiet for a moment and so, in my stewing apprehension, I slipped into the room. I was met with my mother brushing away tears and my brother, Carter, stomping childishly around the room. Just as Carter was about to speak, my mom noticed my presence and looked at me expectantly.

"I, um, was just wondering if I could go over to a friend's house?" I bit my lip nervously, despite knowing my mom would say yes. She tried to blink away the cherry red veins in her eyes, and nodded her head, giving a shallow smile. Carter groaned impatiently in the corner.

"Of course, do you want me to drive you?" She looked at me with a gleam of desperate hope, in need of getting away even if just for ten minutes. Carter started bouncing on the balls of his feet, willing the conversation to end.

"No, I'm okay, I can drive myself." I gave a reassuring smile to my mom, briskly walking out the door, avoiding eye contact with Carter as he pounced back into arguing with our mom.

The drive to Lilian's house was a blurry one, with tears building up inside my eyelids, begging to fall. The access to my splotchy rose cheeks was granted and the tears fell, clearing my vision only for a moment. My fingers were starkly pale, gripping the driving wheel tightly as my mind raced through memories of my brother screaming in the back of a tiny, beat-up Subaru or of holding my breath at the dinner table, trying to disturb Carter as little as possible. Visions of my mom drilling me to see a therapist seeped through. My hand drew back and hit the steering wheel with a harsh smack. And again. And again.

I pulled into Lilian's driveway, sloppily undoing the seat belt and slamming the door. My knuckles scraped against the splintered wood of her front door. A quick kiss was pressed to Lilian's lips as soon as the door opened, followed immediately by:

"Let's get out of here." A brief pause, and then: "Anywhere, just for a little." Lilian raised a brow, her eyes shining with worry before giving a solemn nod.

It was quite the picture, the two of us, with two coke cans, sitting in a finely decorated bathtub in a Victorian style bed n' breakfast the next town over. Lilian thought it'd look nicer if we put roses from the bush outside in the tub to swirl around in the water. I watched her as she looked around, despite being the only one outside and delicately picked three flowers from the bush outside our window. She hurried inside, giggling in the innocent stupor of vandalism. She placed the flower in the water, the soft jets swirling them around, nearly capsizing one already.

So, there we were, coke cans on the ledge and roses traced our bodies. Lilian opened her mouth as if to speak, but no words came out. I raised a brow,

"Yes?" A smirk tugged at the corner of my lips.

"Have you ever thought about seeing a therapist?" My smirk fell, now I was the one gaping, looking for words. My eyes fell downward, tracing the skin of my chest.

“Too expensive.” I could practically hear Lilian rolling her eyes, it was her turn to smirk.

“Says the girl who got us a hotel room to run away in.”

“A bed n’ breakfast room, actually.” My eyes met hers again.

“Same difference.” I bit my lip, a gulp escaping down my throat. I looked away again.

“You’re all the therapy I need.” My eyes found hers and my teeth gleamed in a cheesy smile. Lilian rolled her eyes again, but I had seen the pink tinting her cheeks.

“Oh, please,” She took a breath and then: “Can I at least hold you?” I could see the vulnerability in her face, the way her brows tilted up and inward just the slightest bit, a nervous lick of the lips, her ears grew red. I gave a small nod, feeling quite vulnerable myself, despite my attempts at confidence. I mean, I had a girlfriend for a reason.

“C’mere,” Lilian spoke with a soft lilt in her voice. I slowly positioned my body to lean back against hers, my head on her chest, eyes drifting closed. I allowed my breathing to deepen, allowing myself to fall asleep as Lilian’s fingers toyed with my hair.

Right at that moment, my phone started buzzing in a series of texts. I only knew one person who texts like that. I groaned, burying my face in Lilian’s neck. She didn’t stop playing with my hair.

“Is it okay if I read your texts?” I pressed a light kiss to her neck, giving a nod so small that I’m not sure I actually did it.

“He’s upset. He thinks you left because of him.” I could feel Lilian gulp, despite the calm demeanor in her voice.

“I did.”

“I’ll say you left to spend time with your lovely girlfriend.”

I could hear the smirk in her voice. I paused, breathing out roughly.

“Okay,” I kissed her neck again, “but make sure to do it from my perspective.”

“Already on it.” Lilian pressed a firm kiss to my head before nudging me, “but c’mon, I’m sweating already.”

A little while later, I was sitting on our bed, clad in a shirt and underwear, playing on my phone when Lilian walked out of the ensuite bathroom in a complimentary robe from the bed n’ breakfast.

“Let’s go out.” Lilian smiled prettily at me. I fell back on the bed and let out a groan. “C’mon, fresh air will be good for you!”

“You sound like every mom in every movie, ever.” She raised a brow.

“Yeah, well, this mom is driving our asses to McDonalds. Now, come on, let’s go.” A look of disgust grew on my face as she nudged my leg.

“Ew.” Please never say that again.”

“You started it!”

“And I’m ending it. Also, we’re going through the drive-thru and avoiding as much social interaction as possible.” Lilian smiled at me in amusement.

“You got it.”

The day was coming to a close, the clouds turned from cotton balls to cotton candy, and Lilian bought me McDonalds. We were eating fries, myself dipping them in a chocolate McFlurry sitting in the cup holder of my car, much to Lilian’s disgust.

“So,” I started, looking towards Lilian with intention. She raised a brow,

“So...”

“Why’d you come?” Lilian looked at me quizzically.

“Whaddya mean?” She forced a smile.

“You left with me for a reason,” I looked at her flatly. She smiled at me, almost smugly, or at least trying to be.

“Cause I wanted to spend some time with my lovely girlfriend.” She batted her eyes. I couldn’t help but let out a snort.

“Nice try.” She glanced away, trying to hide her faltering fragile confidence.

“It’s my parents,” she took a breath in, “and my grandparents and,” she let out an annoyed breath, “and my whole goddamn family if I’m being honest.” My brows furrowed. This was the first I was hearing of anything being wrong with her family. I knew her sister could get on her nerves sometimes, but that’s it.

“What’s goin’ on, hun?” I looked at her with expectancy but also slight pity. This was her chance to talk. To be listened to.

“M’ pretty sure my parents are getting a divorce and I’m pretty sure it’s my grandma’s fault ‘cause she can’t stand my mom, and Alissa thinks it’s her fault for needing so many doctors’ appointments ‘cause of her Fibrous Dysplasia, and I have to comfort her every day about it, which I shouldn’t be complaining about, but I need to sleep, and I can’t keep carrying her emotional weight, ‘cause I’m dealing with their divorce, and I have shit of my own, plus SATs and AP classes and I just—” She breathed in and let out a sigh. “I can’t, I can’t.” She shifted uncomfortably in her seat, her now sweaty palm loosening around mine but I quickly squeezed it. I open my mouth to speak, but I couldn’t find my words. I gulped instead. “I’m sorry I shouldn’t be complaining. You’re going through way worse stuff right now and this trip is about you.”

“No, no, no, no, no, no my bullshit doesn’t make yours less valid. This trip is for both of us.” I squeezed her hand again, lifting it up and kissing the back of it lightly yet firmly. I wanted her to know I was there for her. “Please don’t ever hesitate on telling me how you feel, or if you just need to vent. That’s what I’m here for.” I smiled reassuringly at her, she gave a shaky yet genuine one back. A moment passed.

“Thanks, babe.” She gave a warmer smile this time.

“No problem,” I looked at her fondly before: “but could I let go of your hand, I need a fry.” My other hand was too awkwardly far away to reach them properly. She chuckled and rolled her eyes before she released my hand. I quickly grabbed a handful of fries and shoved them into my mouth.

“Thank youuuuu,” I smiled, mouth full of fries, giving her a cheesy grin.

“Ew, close your mouth, please,” She giggled. I rolled my eyes and complied, smiling to myself.

After we enjoyed our very healthy meal, I drove us out to a hill overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge and the city of San Francisco. Lilian moved to get out of the car as I followed. She gracefully slid on the hood of the car whilst I clumsily make my way up, taking at least two attempts with the help of Lilian, despite her sadistic little giggles. Once I was up, our laughter died down, and I looked over at her. The sky was a midnight blue now, the moon shining down on us, and the city light reflecting on Lilian’s face in the most angelic way. The moment was broken by something that sounded quite a bit like Carter’s muffled scream, although was most likely just litter blowing in the wind or a rabbit in the bushes. Still, I couldn’t help but flinch and look down. I could feel Lilian’s worried eyes on me, her hand finding mine.

“Sorry, sorry, something just sounded kinda like my brother screaming. I mean, it definitely wasn’t it just, I just thought at first-” before I could continue, Lilian pulled me into her arms as well as she could on the hood of a car.

“You’re okay. He’s not here. It’s just us.” She whispered, kissing the top of my head softly. I buried my head in her neck, my breaths slowly steadying out. I pressed a firm kiss to the crook of her neck.

“Thank you,” I breathed out, closing my eyes.

“Of course, sweets, I’m here for you, just like you are for me. That’s what I’m here for, eh?” She quipped me, lightening the mood slightly. I sucked in a deep breath and pulled back to look at her.

“This is too fucking poetic.” She let out a chuckle and kissed my nose.

“Yeah, well, it’s about to get even more, so-” Her demeanor changed quickly from caring and confident to nervous and vulnerable. I squeezed her hand to continue. Lilian let go of my hand and retrieved a small velvet box from her pocket. She flipped it open, revealing a small ring with a ruby at its center. A cheaper option, most likely.

“Wanna get hitched?”

I parted my lips and licked them subconsciously.

“What?” I managed to let out, eyes wide. Lilian rolled her eyes and jumped off the car, falling to one knee. It was clear that I should’ve jump off the car, too, but I couldn’t seem to get myself to do it.

“Alona Thea Stilton, will you marry me?” Lilian looked up at me hopefully, the ring box shaking in her hand. I took a deep breath, in and out.

“Lilian...I can’t.” I gulped and looked down at her nervously, finally scooting off the car. She looked up at me in slight horror. “I’m sorry. I’m so so fucking sorry. I know this must be so embarrassing for you-” Lilian stands up harshly.

“You know? How could you know? You ever propose to someone before?” Lilian cut me off and barked at me.

“That’s not what I meant, Lil’, and you know that.” I looked at her, trying to get her to understand.

“Don’t fucking call me that right now,” Lilian said aggressively, looking at her feet. Her arms were crossed over her body, the box with the ring shoved roughly in her pocket.

“Lilian, we’re seventeen. And in high school! Juniors even! What do you expect us to do? We don’t have money for a wedding!”

“We don’t need to have a big wedding,” She cut me off, grumbling.

“What would our parents say? Our friends? Our peers?”

“Who cares what they think?” Lilian burst out, finally looking up at me and throwing them into the air.

“It’s a big commitment, Lilian.” Tears formed in her eyes, her hands shaking.

“You don’t wanna spend your life with me?” Her voice was broken. I let out a deep breath.

“I want to spend my life with you, but we’ve both had an emotional day, and we’re only seventeen, and while spending my life with you feels right, I know that a lot of the decisions I’m making at this age aren’t always the best ones. I want to be with you, but I want to know if the me three years from now wants to be with you too. And I don’t know that yet.” A tear I hadn’t even realized formed slipped down my cheek. I bit my lip roughly, tasting the iron of blood on my tongue. Lilian stared at me in shock. “I’m sorry, but I said no.” Lilian gulped and nodded her head slightly.

“Okay,” fell faintly from her lips, my ears barely picking up on it. She trudged back to the passenger seat of the car and slammed the door. I sucked in a harsh breath and moved to sit in the driver’s seat.

Surprisingly, Lilian came back with me to our room. I think she may have felt bad that I paid for so much, despite being mad. We immediately went to bed, laying on opposite sides, back facing each other. I stared out the window, watching the minimal traffic of our small town. I heard a shifting behind me and felt Lilian’s fingertips trace my spine. Even when she wasn’t conscious, she wanted to cuddle. I glanced over my shoulder. She was always so pretty, even when she slept, something I was always jealous of. Sighing quietly, I took one more look out the window before I slipped out of bed, relieving my aching shoulder from the weight of my body.

I crept up the stairs of my house, praying that one of the stairs wouldn’t creek too loudly. I couldn’t sleep in the same bed as Lilian. Not now, at least. I needed space to think. The last step creaks and a sharp scream was let out from the door across from mine. I tiptoe-ran into my room, a skill I learned years ago.

I closed my door gently before letting the waterfall of emotion out, slowly crumpling against the door, my knees giving out. My body racked with sobs but I was careful not to let out any sound. I think of everything that happened. I thought about what the future for Lily and I was if there even was one. I thought about my past with my brother, how my body naturally reacted in fear of him. How I flinched when I thought I heard him scream, and how I sobbed when I did. Anger washed over me at the realization of how much my brother conditioned me to him. Everything I did, it seemed, was in fear of him. Even to the point of booking a room to get away.

Questions racked my brain, all in irrational anger, most of which weren’t fair to Carter, but I couldn’t help it in that moment. Why did he have to have PANDAS? Why did he have to have such tormented coping mechanisms? Just why? Why my brother, why did I deserve to be the outlet of his rage? Of his anxiety? Of his OCD? And depression? Why was my pain his coping mechanism?

PANDAS, an autoimmune disease with the side effects, at least in my brother, of severe anxiety, depression, and OCD. I never knew mental illness could become emotionally abusing for those around you. I learned that lesson the hard way, I guess.

I wiped the tears that were still forming, my throat was scratchy and my head was heavy. I was emotionally, physically, and mentally drained. Despite this, I grabbed my phone and drafted out a text to Lilian. I was angry, too, and we needed to talk. I glanced at the time. It was 4:05 A.M. and I had a personal rule. If it’s past 3 A.M., don’t make any more decisions and just go to bed. Not only was I tired, but I was angry and heartbroken and so fucking scared for the future. Now was not a good time to send heavy texts. I deleted the draft and dropped my phone into my lap. My anger died down, but I knew I still would never be able to get to sleep. I let out a sigh.

“Fuck it.” As quietly as I could, I snuck back out of my room and down the stairs.

As I pulled into the McDonalds drive-thru for the second time in the last 12 hours, I felt a sob rise in my throat, but I stifled it down to order my bacon cheeseburger, medium fries, and chocolate McFlurry. But once I got my food and parked my car, I couldn't keep the sobs from coming.

The door creaked as I crept back into our room in the bed n' breakfast. The clock said it was 5:50 A.M.. I lightly crawled into bed, this time facing Lilian.

"Where were you?" She mumbled sleepily. I sucked in a breath, not realizing she woke up.

"I just needed some space to think. Sorry, I didn't want you to wake up alone."

"Too late." She let out a deep breath, "You didn't even leave a note." I thought about arguing with her, telling her I thought I'd be back before she woke up. But that wasn't true, and we were both so tired. Instead, I just let out a quiet,

"I'm sorry" and closed my eyes to go to sleep after making sure she did the same.

Later in the morning, Lilian and I got ready quietly. I glanced over at her periodically. I couldn't help it. I missed her even though she was standing five feet away.

"Can we talk? Go out and get coffee? Maybe a bit later? 11 A.M.?" I asked hesitantly, my eyes wide with nerves. She looked over at me sorrowfully and nodded.

"Café Étienne. 11 A.M."

I sat at a booth table in the far back corner, hopefully out of earshot of the majority of the café. My fingers drummed on the table as I sipped my cold brew impatiently. Lilian walked through the open French doors of the café, sunlight drowning her as hanging flowers and vines framed her. She looked around before spotting me in the back. She slid across from me in the booth and sucked in a harsh breath.

"I'm sorry for leaving you during the night. You're right. I should have stayed, especially after everything that happened." I gulped, eyes looking at her with hope.

"I just wanted to wake up next to you for once." She said quietly, eyes locked on her caffè misto, her fingers bouncing against the cup. My eyes grew heavy, sorrowful.

"I'm sorry, but we're teenagers! I can't marry you! At least...not yet."

"Why not? If later, why not now?" She looked up at me, her eyes pleading.

"Because we've never lived together before! And we've only been together for a year, and we're probably gonna change a lot in the next few years, and while I want us to stand the test of time, I don't want to take a risk that big at such a young age. We don't need to be married to be happy." I took a deep breath, rubbing my eyes. Lilian stayed quiet for a moment.

"I just want to know you'll always be mine." She said quietly.

"Don't you already know that? You trust me, don't you?"

"It's not you that I don't trust," I raised a brow.

"What?" I let out softly.

“Sometimes I forget how much I love you, and I feel awful every time it happens, but I feel like a ring would be a constant reminder! Something to hold me to you.” Lilian’s eyes were red from lack of sleep or tears, I don’t know.

“You think getting married will keep us together? We shouldn’t have to get married to stay together!” I took a deep breath. Lilian stayed silent. All I wanted was to reach across the table and take her hand. But, we weren’t there yet. It was almost like it was back to the beginning. I didn’t mind, not if it meant keeping Lily. She looked up at me with teary eyes.

“Can we just go back to twenty-four hours ago? Pretend none of this happened?” I looked away, tears of my own forming.

“You know I want to,” Lilian almost let out a sob but stifled it quickly. “God, I want to so badly,” I groaned, looking down. My hand shot up to catch the tears from falling, while Lilian watched my every move. “But I need some time to think - I think you do, too.”

“But where does that leave us?” Lily was trying hard not to sob, the corners of her lips were faltering downwards and her face grew red. Her throat contracted with a sob, but it only came out as a whimper. She wasn’t as good at sobbing silently as I was.

“Meet back here in 24 hours?” Lilian nodded slowly, looking down at the time on her phone. I gave her a slightly awkward smile that was trying desperately to be reassuring and slid out of the booth, my fingertips dabbing at my eyes. Lilian didn’t make any moves to get up, so I walked out of the café.

I avoided going home for as long as possible, but eventually, I had to. My mom was getting worried. I sat at the dinner table, eating as quietly as I could. Carter was fragile tonight - anything could set him off, like my dad dropping a fork. As if the loud clatter of metal against wood wasn’t enough, he brushed Carter’s shoulder when bending down to pick it up. I cringed internally, ready for the badgering to begin. My dad quickly apologizes but it was too late.

“Why’d you apologize? You didn’t need to apologize, it was fine!” Carter’s voice raised as he spoke, talking faster and faster. His hands started to shake and his eyes were bug-wide. My dad’s eyes furrowed.

“I don’t know, because it was the right thing to do? That’s just what people do.” My dad pointed it out plainly, as if Carter would accept that answer.

“But everything was fine until you apologized! I didn’t care about you dropping the fork, it was you apologizing!” Carter claimed, but knowing him, he would have been upset about that too, or it at least would have got to him, leading to him bursting out about something later.

“Carter-” My mom tried, but my dad rubbed his eyes with an annoyed groan.

“Why’d he do that! You’re just making everything worse! Why are you doing this to me?” Carter cried out, interrupting my mom entirely.

“Wha-I didn’t do anything!” My dad exclaimed in annoyance, rolling his eyes. My mom tried to diffuse the situation but I drowned it out, my eyes glazing over slightly. My mind felt foggy as I froze my entire body, including my breathing. I’d do anything to not disturb him further. I only listened for the calming of voices, an indicator that I could leave without annoying Carter too much. When that finally happened, I stood up from my chair carefully and grabbed my plate, walking out of the dining room as fast as possible.

“I think I’m gonna go to my room now, thanks for dinner!” I called out as I put my plate down in the kitchen.

“Okay, maybe we can watch a show later?” My mom tried, she needed a break. But I couldn’t tonight. I needed to be alone. I needed to get my shit together.

“Yeah, maybe,” I yelled out, trying to avoid a conversation.

The next day, I walked towards the café when I saw Lilian sat at one of their rickety little outdoor tables. She had her caffè misto in her hands and a cold brew placed in front of the chair across from her. I bit my lip and sat down, taking a sip of my coffee.

“Thank you” I murmured, smiling softly at her. She smiled back. God, I missed her. Her eyes were rimmed red, puffy bags underneath them.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to marry me, at least not yet. I think I understand where you’re coming from. I just don’t want to lose you.” Lilian was calm, but I could tell with that last sentence, she was choking on a sob, but she swallowed it down and looked at me hopefully.

“Thank you for saying that,” I smiled reassuringly at her. “And I agree, I don’t want to lose you either. I love you so goddamn much, and I do want to live a full life with you, a long life, hopefully.” I chuckled, somewhat awkwardly, and she did too. But that’s okay. It’s okay if it was awkward for a bit. We were together, that’s what mattered. Lilian sighed happily, brightening up.

“I love you so much.”

“I love you too.” I grasped her hand across the table, giving it a firm squeeze.

All I could hear was my brother’s muffled scream, my hands clenched tightly to either side of my head. They slowly slid off my ears, shaking haphazardly, jagged and uncontrolled. Fingers fumbled with my phone, shooting a messy text to Lilian. Lilian. My safe house when my actual house didn’t feel all that safe. Just to talk to her - anything to distract me. To distract me from the tears spilling down my cheeks. And another text. To my mom this time. One sentence:

I want to see a therapist.

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