

Case 12: Warning Signs

Ten years have passed since Colette broke up with her ex, Carson. They dated each other for a little over two years. When Colette initially met Carson, she thought he was the man of her dreams; he was more kind, gentle, and loving than anyone she had ever met. But about a year into their relationship, after Colette said something that upset Carson, he responded by hitting her.

This shocked Colette, who had always considered Carson very gentle. However, since Carson had only abused his girlfriend once, Colette regarded this incident as an aberration and promised herself she would remain with Carson. But as their relationship continued, Carson assaulted his girlfriend with increasing frequency and for smaller and smaller things.

This took an emotional toll on Colette. She found herself miserable and unable to function productively, and whenever she was around Carson, she felt scared for her life; she worried that she would say or do something that would provoke Carson's violence. After every abusive incident, Carson would apologize and promise it would never happen ever again. But Carson continued to be abusive, and Colette's mental state deteriorated with every attack. Finally, after a year, Colette was able to safely get out of this abusive relationship.

Recently, while scrolling on Instagram, Colette stumbled across a post that left her feeling anxious: her co-worker Tammy shared a story celebrating her one-month anniversary with her new boyfriend: Carson. Tammy started working at the company where Colette works six months ago, and they don't know each other very well. In the photo, the two look genuinely happy and at ease with each other. But after seeing this post, Colette is now wondering if she should tell Tammy about Carson's history of abuse.

Not only had the relationship she was in with Carson taken an emotional toll on her at the time, but it had lasting consequences. Since breaking up with Carson, Colette has struggled with trust issues and has been unwilling to date out of fear that she might be hurt or abused again. Colette wouldn't wish this on anyone else and feels responsible for reaching out to Tammy to warn her.

On the other hand, Colette feels that talking to Tammy might be intrusive. After all, it has been ten years since she broke up with her boyfriend. When they got together, they were college students in their first serious relationship, and now, they are in their early thirties. Tammy thinks it's very likely that Carson has changed since then. If Colette tells this to Tammy and Carson has changed, Tammy could proceed to break up with Carson anyway. Additionally, Colette fears that telling Tammy could trigger abuse in the relationship: if she tells Tammy, Tammy will very likely tell Carson, which could be dangerous for her.

But Colette still feels like she has a responsibility to tell Tammy. Colette remembers reading an article published by the National Domestic Violence Hotline indicating that a very small percentage of abusers change their ways throughout their entire lives. Her abusive relationship with Carson had a lasting impact on her and if anything were to happen to Tammy, Colette feels that she would be responsible. She wonders if she'll fear a deep sense of guilt if she says nothing, and something happens to Tammy.

Discussion Questions:

1. When, if at all, do we have a moral responsibility to warn others of dangers they're not aware of?
2. To what extent does your level of closeness to someone determine your ethical obligation to protect them?
3. Can we make reasonable assumptions that people change over time?
4. What are ways we can ensure people are safe without explicitly warning them of dangers?