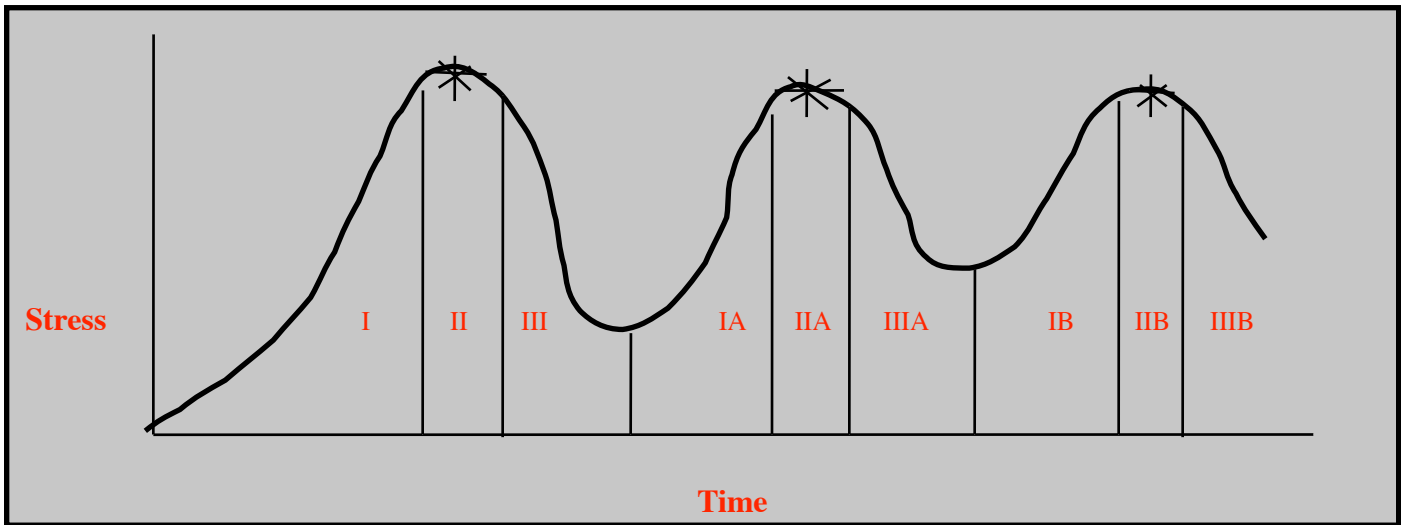


HOW ABUSE AND VIOLENCE CAN OCCUR IN A PARTNER RELATIONSHIP



Many couples can clearly recognize and talk about how abuse and violence occur in their relationship over the course of time. Women tend to see this pattern most clearly but men can frequently acknowledge the process as well. Below are the three phases that both we and others (Walker, 1979) have identified that often occur when abuse and violence are present in a relationship.

THE ESCALATION PHASE (I): A period of increased tension that builds over time and may include unresolved arguments in the relationship, job stress, financial pressures, increased chemical use, passive responses to conflicts (inside and outside the home), and a build-up of resentments and frustration. Generally, the man has little, if any, awareness about the stress building and does little, if any, talking about the tension and the feelings behind it. Nor does he generally make attempts to use other healthy ways to handle the stress in his life in a more direct and effective way. The more powerless and shameful he feels inside, the greater his control and aggression tends to become toward his partner. There may be verbal and emotional abuse, threats, destruction of property, and some less severe physical abuse as the tension continues to mount and becomes unbearable for him (and for his partner). An escalation may occur over minutes, hours, days, weeks, or even months but the eventual outcome is more severe abuse, intimidation, or violence. The woman is often significantly more aware that tension is building for him and in their relationship than her partner is but feels powerless to do anything about it.

WHAT CAN HAPPEN WITH THE MAN IN PHASE I:

- blames her for his increased stress, his increased anger and resentment and his controlling and abusive reactions to his partner
- makes unreasonable demands/has unrealistic expectations of her
- becomes more harsh, oppressive, and controlling
- feels more and more powerless at home and in the rest of his life
- tends to deny and minimize the stress in his life and the impact of his control and intimidation on her and others around him
- often feels jealous/mistrustful/possessive toward his partner
- feels escalated and angry much of the time (but generally denies feelings behind the anger, e.g. hurt, fear, sadness, self-doubt, insecurity, inadequacy, disappointment)
- believes that it is her responsibility to make him feel better/"okay"
- feels more and more "out of control"
- becomes more and more isolated
- may increase alcohol/drug use to try to reduce his stress level
- views her withdrawal (if she does this) from him as her rejecting and abandoning him which only escalates him more

WHAT CAN HAPPEN WITH HIS PARTNER IN PHASE I:

- often believes that she can (or should be able to) control his moods and outbursts and attempts to do this
- often hides her own anger due to fear of reprisal by him
- tends to blame his abusive incidents on external situations (e.g. work and financial stress) and tries to control as many of these situations as she can (e.g. children's behavior)
- believes that nothing she does is "good enough" and feels like she is continually "walking on eggshells" around him
- tends to deny and minimize the abusive incidents and their impact on her and their children (if they have any)
- starts to realize that she is not going to be able to control his outbursts and feels powerless to stop the abuse (may appear, at times, to actually be "inviting" the abuse due to her desire to "get it over" and decrease the stress level that exists in their relationship)
- often tends to withdraw to protect herself, which only increases his frustration, irritation, and resentment with her
- often tends to blame herself for the abuse and may become more and more isolated from her friends and family
- with each incident, her self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-respect are further depleted

THE EXPLOSION PHASE (II): A “seemingly” uncontrollable discharge of pent-up and accumulated tension by the man that is actually a clear (though perhaps not conscious) choice to lash out at his partner to relieve his stress and to control her and the situation. **Examples of choices may include time and place it occurs, being physical vs. not being physical, using an open hand vs. a closed fist, assaulting only certain parts of her body, and making the decision about how long the abusive incident lasts.** Anything can be the catalyst for the explosion, even something that seems trivial and insignificant at the time (i.e. the proverbial “straw that broke the camel’s back”). This phase begins and ends with more serious and destructive abuse or violence than the abusive behavior that generally has occurred during the escalation phase. This is the phase where there is the most likelihood of “outsiders” (e.g. police, friends, neighbors, relatives) becoming involved with the couple and their relationship. Eventually, severe emotional and verbal abuse and threats can be as devastating as the physical abuse to the woman, and violence may no longer even be necessary to exert control and domination in the relationship.

WHAT CAN HAPPEN WITH THE MAN IN PHASE II:

- starts out to “teach her a lesson” and prove that he is “right” and in control of their relationship (wants to punish her for not being who he thinks she should be)
- feels “out of control,” rageful, hateful, and vengeful and acts these out by striking out verbally and physically at her
- blames her for his abuse and/or violence (he feels “justified”)
- often surprised and even scared about the intensity of his rage and the severity of the abuse
- does not understand what happened or how he got so “out of control” and tends to deny the severity of his abuse and its impact on his partner (and children, if present)
- may believe that he has “resolved the problems” in the relationship with this controlling and abusive behavior
- may experience enormous physiological and emotional release from perpetrating the abuse and often feels, looks, and acts more calm and relaxed immediately afterward
- often cannot remember details or describe the incident and his abusive behavior due to his denial and shame
- may blame his abuse and/or violence on his (or her) excessive use of alcohol or drugs
- payoffs like the stress release and temporarily gaining control of the situation reinforce the likelihood that more serious abuse and/or violence will be repeated in the future

WHAT CAN HAPPEN WITH HIS PARTNER IN PHASE II:

- her behavior does not affect the outcome although she may be more seriously injured if she attempts to defend herself physically
- views escape from the situation as it is happening as futile
- disassociation may occur (i.e. she may “stand back” and detach emotionally from the abuse and “watch it happen to her”)
- feels terrified, hurt, sad, humiliated, ashamed, degraded, angry, and resentful
- symptoms for her after an acute assault can include shock; disbelief; denial; minimization; anxiety; rationalization; lethargy and listlessness; feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and powerlessness; depression; hurt; disappointment; and rage
- often blames herself for his abuse (she looks for ways that she “should have done something different” to intervene in order to experience some sense of control and power in the situation and in her life)
- may appear “hysterical” and may seem to have “psychological problems” to outsiders who attempt to intervene (e.g. police)
- often much more able to remember and describe the violent incident accurately with very specific details about what happened
- may be unhelpful to the police or request that assault charges not be filed to demonstrate her loyalty to her partner so she can avoid his anger about her “disloyalty” and further abuse that could follow from her cooperating with the “outsiders”

THE DECEPTION PHASE (III): This final phase is also often referred to by some people as the “honeymoon phase.” But, in reality, it is not actually a “honeymoon” at all. In fact, this is a time when the man often deceives himself and attempts to deceive his partner (and his partner often deceives herself as well), into believing that his controlling and abusive attitudes and behaviors will stop after this most recent explosive incident. This phase can also involve genuine remorse and shame that the man experiences due to his fear that he has actually “gone too far” with his partner in trying to assume control of the relationship (e.g. even if a man is rarely sad and tearful, he may sob uncontrollably at the prospect of his partner leaving the relationship or if she has already left after an abusive incident). For the woman, this phase may simply be a signal that the more severe abuse in their relationship is “over” for the time being. At this point, he might also be fearful that she may leave him or involve outsiders in their “issues” (e.g. police, friends, relatives) in their relationship by talking with them about what has been going on. Because of his fear, he may “bend over backwards” to be kind, attentive, loving, and considerate and his “model behavior” often involves making promises about what he will do and change in the future, buying gifts for her, or “doing something special” for his partner to make up for how he has been abusive to her. His partner often desperately wants to believe the promises about how he will change and once again sees hope for herself and the relationship, thus solidifying her victimization. Intermittent reinforcement, which refers to occasional unpredictable rewards, is one of the most effective ways to change human behavior. Over time, if the man does not actually seek help for himself, his promises to his partner become hollow and this phase often disappears completely. For some couples, however, the deception phase does not exist at all from the beginning. Instead, the time after the explosion phase is only a short period with the temporary absence of overt abuse and few, if any, attempts at the kind of deception noted above.

WHAT CAN HAPPEN WITH THE MAN IN PHASE III:

- may be frightened by his own rage and aggressive behavior and often realizes that he has “gone too far this time”
- may express regret about his abusive behavior and feel guilty and shameful about what he has done to her
- often asks for her forgiveness and vows that the abuse will never happen again (he may believe the abuse will not be necessary because he is now “back in control”)
- may accept some responsibility for his behavior but his primary motivation in doing this is not to learn from or stop the abusive behavior but rather to appease his partner, save their relationship, and/or avoid legal or other consequences
- may make promises that he will change: e.g. to stop using or abusing alcohol/drugs; to work less or more or get a new job; to give her more freedom and not to act so jealous; to spend more time with her and the children; to cease doing other things that irritate her; to stop going out with other women; to stop being controlling, abusive, and/or violent
- may act caring, affectionate, and considerate of her and her needs (e.g. buying her flowers, candy, and other presents, taking her out on “special” dates, and offering to “do things for her”)
- at the same time, stress begins to build once again due to his belief that he now has to “bend over backwards” and “walk on eggshells” to convince her to forgive him and stay with him
- may enlist children, extended family, and even friends to “plead his case” with her and work on her guilt and confusion about pursuing legal consequences, separating, and/or ending their relationship
- at times, tries to encourage her to see “what she did wrong” to cause or provoke the abuse and violence he directed at her
- eventually, when he also realizes that he will continue to be controlling and abusive, he may stop apologizing, offering gifts, and making promises to change that he knows he will not follow through with anyway

WHAT CAN HAPPEN WITH HIS PARTNER IN PHASE III:

- terror and anger motivate her to think about leaving (wants to “escape” the control and abuse but also feels fearful and guilty about the idea of actually going)
- struggles with her inability to control his abusive behavior but may still feel responsible in some way for his words and actions and continues to want to believe that she has some control in this situation and in her life
- wants to believe the promises that he will change and may choose to believe this, enjoying his caring and attention to her and idealizing him and the relationship, seeing once again the part of him that she loves, thus solidifying her victimization
- may also return or remain out of fear, believing that being around him is safer and better than not knowing where he is or what he is doing
- begins to become acutely aware that he is not really changing his controlling and abusive ways and that his habitual reactions to stress and his desire to control her are returning in their life together (she starts to recognize that his words in the deception phase and that his actions at other times do not match)
- feels “stuck,” “trapped,” depressed, anxious, powerless, helpless, hopeless, and completely overwhelmed
- if she does not follow through with legal consequences and/or decides against leaving and goes back to him without any clear expectations, others who are concerned about her may become frustrated and exasperated with her and give up trying to help, once again leaving her isolated and alone with her controlling and abusive partner

WITHOUT CLEAR CONSEQUENCES, PROFESSIONAL INTERVENTION, AND THE ACQUISITION OF NEW SKILLS AND STRATEGIES TO COPE WITH THE MAN'S EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL STRESSES AND HIS DESIRE TO CONTROL AND ABUSE THAT HE EXPERIENCES IN THE ESCALATION PHASE, THERE IS A STRONG LIKELIHOOD THAT THESE PHASES WILL CONTINUE TO RE-PLAY THEMSELVES IN THE RELATIONSHIP AS THE MAN AND HIS PARTNER MOVE ON IN THEIR LIFE TOGETHER. IN GENERAL, HIS CONTROLLING AND ABUSIVE ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS WILL ONLY BECOME MORE PRONOUNCED AND MORE A PART OF THEIR ONGOING RELATIONSHIP IF THEY ARE NOT ADDRESSED DIRECTLY.

PHASE IA (IB, IC): Similar to Phase I except that the stress from the first explosion increases the overall tension level in the relationship, which means that the potential for more abuse to occur sooner becomes even greater.

PHASE IIA (IIB, IIC): Similar to Phase II but now the type of abusive behavior necessary to bring about the stress release or to control his partner or the situation may need to be even more frequent and/or more severe. And, as the controlling and abusive behavior continues, the man's emotional and verbal abuse and threats can have an even more intimidating and damaging effect on his partner.

PHASE IIIA (IIIB, IIIC): Similar to Phase III except that the deception phase may get shorter or disappear completely since both partners begin to realize that the control and abuse will not end unless the man does something significantly different to change his destructive attitudes that are fueling his controlling and abusive behaviors. His apologies and promises may stop or seem more insincere as his shame about his abusiveness builds and as he increasingly denies and minimizes his responsibility for his abuse and the impact that his abuse is having on his partner and his children (if they have any).

Adapted from L. Walker, *The Battered Woman* (1979), who writes about a "cycle of violence" involving the "tension-building phase," the "acute battering incident," and the "calm, loving respite."