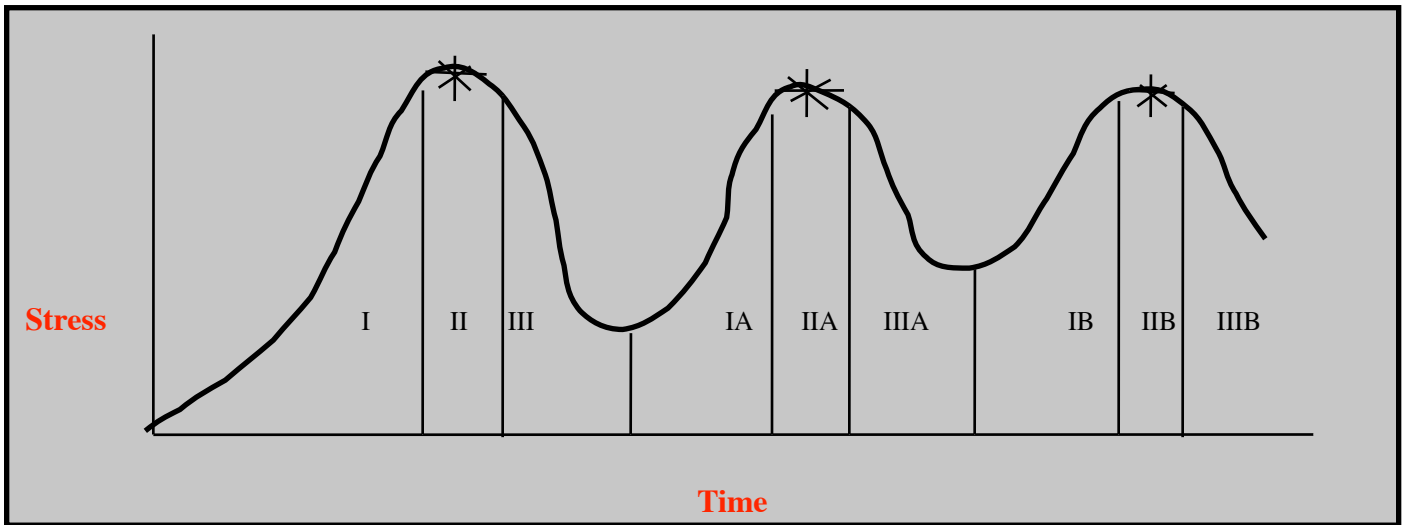


HOW ABUSE AND VIOLENCE CAN OCCUR IN A RELATIONSHIP



Many couples can clearly recognize and can 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.

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 (in and outside the home), and a build-up of resentments. 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 use other healthy ways to handle the stress in his life. The more powerless and shameful he feels inside, the greater his control and aggression tends to become. 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. An escalation may last minutes, hours, days, weeks, or 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.

WHAT CAN HAPPEN WITH THE MAN:

- blames her for his increased stress, his increased anger/resentment, and his controlling and abusive reactions
- makes unreasonable demands/has unrealistic expectations
- becomes more oppressive and controlling
- feels more and more powerless at home and in the rest of his life
- denies and minimizes the stress in his life and the impact of his control/intimidation on her and others
- often feels jealous/mistrustful of his partner
- feels escalated/angry much of the time (but generally denies feelings behind the anger, e.g. hurt, fear, sadness, insecurity, inadequacy, disappointment)
- believes 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
- views her withdrawal from him as rejection/abandonment which further escalates him

WHAT CAN HAPPEN WITH HIS PARTNER:

- often believes she can (or should be able to) control his moods and outbursts and attempts to do so
- often hides her own anger due to fear of reprisal
- blames abusive incidents on external situations (e.g. work/financial stress) and works to control as many as she can (e.g. children's behavior)
- believes that nothing she does is “good enough” and feels like she is “walking on eggshells”
- denies and minimizes 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 be “inviting” the abuse due to her desire to “get it over” and decrease the stress level that exists for them)
- often tends to withdraw to protect herself, which only increases his frustration/irritation/resentment
- often tends to blame herself for the abuse and may become more and more isolated from friends and family
- with each incident, her self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-respect are further depleted

EXPLOSION PHASE (II): A “seemingly” uncontrollable discharge of pent-up and accumulated tension 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. closed fist, assaulting only certain parts of the body, and making the decision about how long the incident lasts.** Anything can be the catalyst for the explosion, even something that seems trivial and insignificant at the time. This phase begins and ends with more serious and destructive abuse or violence than the abusive behavior that generally occurs during the escalation phase. This is the phase where there is the most likelihood of outsiders (e.g. police, neighbors, relatives) becoming involved with the couple. 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:

- starts out to “teach her a lesson” and prove that he is 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
- blames her for his abuse and/or violence (feels justified)
- often surprised and 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
- may believe that he has “resolved the problems” in the relationship with his abusive behavior
- may experience enormous physiological/emotional release from perpetrating the abuse and often feels calm and relaxed immediately afterward
- often cannot remember 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/drugs
- payoffs like the stress release and gaining control of the situation reinforce the likelihood that the more serious abuse and/or violence will be repeated

WHAT CAN HAPPEN WITH HIS PARTNER:

- her behavior does not affect outcome although she may be more seriously injured if she defends herself physically
- views escape from the situation as futile
- disassociation often occurs (i.e. may “stand back”/ detach emotionally from the abuse and watch it happen to herself)
- feels terrified, hurt, humiliated, ashamed, degraded, angry, and resentful
- symptoms after acute assault can include shock; disbelief; denial; minimization; anxiety; rationalization; listlessness and lethargy; feelings of hopelessness, helplessness and powerlessness; depression; and rage
- often blames herself for his abuse (looks for ways she should have done something different 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
- often much more able to remember and describe the violent incident with specific details
- may attack the police or request that assault charges not be filed to demonstrate her loyalty to her partner so she can avoid further abuse

DECEPTION PHASE (III): This final phase is also often referred to as the “honeymoon stage.” But, in fact, it’s not really a “honeymoon” at all. The reality is that 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 the control and abuse will stop after the most recent explosion. 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. For the woman, this phase may simply be a signal that the more severe abuse is over for now. At this point, he is also fearful that she may leave him or involve outsiders (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 the future, buying gifts, or “doing something special” for his partner. 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, the promises become hollow and this phase often disappears completely. For some couples, however, this 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 abuse and few, if any, attempts even at the kind of deception noted above.

WHAT CAN HAPPEN WITH THE MAN:

- 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 and feel guilty and shameful about what he has done
- often asks for her forgiveness and vows that the abuse will never happen again (may believe that the abuse won't be necessary because he is now “back in control”)
- may accept some responsibility for his behavior but his primary motivation is not to learn from or stop the abusive behavior but rather to appease her, save their relationship, and/or avoid legal consequences
- may make promises that he will change: e.g. to stop using/ abusing alcohol/drugs; to work less or more or get a new job; to give her more freedom and not 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 abusive/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 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 about separating or ending the relationship
- at times, tries to encourage her to see “what she did wrong” to cause or provoke the abuse/violence
- eventually, when he also realizes that he will continue to be abusive, he may stop apologizing, offering gifts, and making promises to change that he knows he won't follow through with anyway

WHAT CAN HAPPEN WITH HIS PARTNER:

- terror and anger motivate her to think about leaving (wants to escape the abuse but also feels fearful and guilty about the idea of 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
- wants to believe the promises that he will change and may choose to do so, enjoying his caring and attention to her and idealizing him and relationship, seeing once again the part of him that she loves, thus ensuring her victimization
- may also return or remain out of fear, believing that being around him is safer than not knowing where he is or what he is doing
- begins to become acutely aware that he is not really changing and that his habitual reactions to stress and his desire to control are returning in their life together (starts to recognize that his words in the deception phase and his actions at other times do not match)
- feels “stuck,” trapped, depressed, anxious, powerless, helpless, and hopeless
- if she does not follow through with legal consequences and/or decides against leaving and goes back to him, others concerned about her may become frustrated and exasperated with her and give up, once again leaving her isolated and alone

WITHOUT CONSEQUENCES, PROFESSIONAL INTERVENTION, AND THE ACQUISITION OF NEW SKILLS TO COPE WITH THE EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL STRESSES AND THE DESIRE TO CONTROL AND ABUSE THAT IS EXPERIENCED IN THE ESCALATION PHASE, THERE IS A STRONG LIKELIHOOD THAT THE PHASES WILL CONTINUE TO REPEAT THEMSELVES IN THE RELATIONSHIP.

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 of the situation may need to be even more severe or more frequent. And, as the abusive and controlling behavior continues, the man's verbal/emotional abuse and threats 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 attitudes fueling his 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.