



dynamics of VIOLENCE

One of the most commonly asked questions regarding domestic violence is “Why do women stay in abusive relationships?” It may be more appropriate, however, to examine the question “Why do men abuse the people they say they love?” Answers to these questions require an understanding of the phases of abusive behavior, the progression of violence, the use of power to attain control of a relationship, the effects of abuse, and societal forces that perpetuate an atmosphere conducive to abuse.

Phases of Abuse. In her work and interviews with victims, Lenore Walker (1979) discovered a definite battering cycle that victims experience. Below are the phases of Walker’s cycle.

Phase 1: Tension Building - Time where tension mounts and small outbursts occur. Victims feel like they must “walk on egg shells” so that the abuser will not explode.

Phase 2: Acute Battering Incident - Abuser decides to “teach her a lesson” by becoming physically abusive. Victim’s behavior cannot change the outcome. She feels helpless and depressed.

Phase 3: Kindness and Contrite Loving Behavior - Abuser asks for forgiveness and promises that the violence won’t happen again. He enlists other family and friends to plead his case. Victim wants to believe the promise and wants this to be the “real” person she loves. She may return or remain in the situation due to fear of what he will do if she leaves.

Progression of Violence. Research shows that without intervention, a batterer’s abuse increases in intensity and frequency over time. The abuser may stay at higher and higher levels of escalation, rarely dropping to lower levels.

The Use of Power to Attain Control in a Relationship. The Domestic Abuse Intervention Project, Duluth, MN created a power and control wheel to teach others how abusers use violence to keep control of the relationship. The abuser uses: coercion and threats, intimidation, emotional abuse, isolation, economic abuse, entitlement, and children to control his partner. He also minimizes, denies and blames her for his behavior. The core issue for him is to be in control of the relationship in order to have his needs met. If the aforementioned tactics do not work, then he enforces his threats with physical and/or sexual violence.

Societal Forces Which Perpetuate Abuse. There are many myths about domestic violence. These myths and misconceptions about abusers and battered women instill false beliefs about who is affected by domestic violence, how often it happens, the seriousness of the issue, what causes it, and what can make it stop. Society’s lack of understanding and, consequently, lack of support leaves women feeling isolated and alone.

