

# CYCLE OF VIOLENCE

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## CYCLE OF VIOLENCE

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Clinical Psychology, Forensic Psychology, Domestic Violence Studies

**Proponents:** Lenore Walker

### 1. Core Principles: The Conceptual Framework

The **Cycle of Violence** is a seminal psychological framework developed by American clinical and forensic psychologist Lenore Walker in the late 1970s and early 1980s, designed to explain the repetitive and often escalating pattern of abusive behaviors within intimate relationships. This model posits that abusive relationships do not consist of isolated incidents of violence but rather follow a predictable, three-stage behavioral pattern that ensures the perpetuation of the abuse. The framework provides a crucial analytical tool for comprehending why victims often find themselves unable to leave abusive partners, as the inherent cyclical nature involves periods of positive reinforcement interspersed with destructive behavior, creating a powerful emotional and psychological bond known as **trauma bonding**.

The core principle underlying the cycle is that violence serves a functional purpose for the abuser, primarily as a mechanism for releasing mounting tension and reasserting control, while simultaneously fostering a false sense of hope in the victim. By demonstrating patterns rather than randomness, the model helps professionals categorize the dynamic elements of **intimate partner violence (IPV)**, shifting the focus from the victim's supposed weaknesses to the structured manipulation employed by the perpetrator. Understanding these stages is essential for effective clinical intervention and judicial response, as it deconstructs the irrationality often associated with abuse and replaces it with a recognizable, albeit dangerous, structure.

Walker's postulation challenged earlier, simplistic interpretations of domestic violence which often placed undue blame or responsibility on the victim for either provoking the violence or failing to leave the relationship. Instead, the Cycle of Violence offers a compelling explanation rooted in behavioral psychology and control dynamics. It identifies the critical role of reinforcement schedules--where periods of abuse are followed by periods of calm and contrition--which serve to maintain the victim's investment in the relationship, hoping for the return of the idealized partner seen during the peaceful phase, thus locking them into the repetitive sequence.

### 2. Historical Context and Development

The development of the Cycle of Violence model was profoundly influenced by Lenore Walker's extensive research with hundreds of women experiencing abuse, culminating in her influential 1979 book, *The Battered Woman*. Prior to her work, the systematic study of domestic violence was

underdeveloped, and cultural stereotypes often minimized the severity or complexity of the issue. Walker sought to establish a clinical definition of the phenomenon and provide a theoretical foundation for the observed behaviors of victims, particularly the psychological state known as **learned helplessness**.

In the context of the emerging women's movement and heightened awareness of social injustices in the 1970s, the model provided crucial validation for the subjective experiences of survivors. By detailing the predictable stages, the framework refuted the popular misconception that victims could simply choose to leave, showing instead that the abuse itself was designed to erode the victim's autonomy and decision-making capacity. This analytical tool quickly became a cornerstone of domestic violence advocacy and legal reform across the United States and internationally.

Walker's contribution was transformative because it moved the discourse surrounding domestic violence away from pathology within the victim and toward the behavioral systems within the relationship dynamic itself. Her research provided the empirical basis necessary for training law enforcement, shelter staff, and clinicians on the characteristic patterns of abuse, helping them recognize the danger signs and the subtle psychological traps inherent in the cycle. The model remains one of the most widely cited and recognizable theories in the study of gender-based violence and relationship dynamics.

### 3. Key Concepts and Components: The Three Stages

The Cycle of Violence is explicitly divided into three primary, identifiable stages, which repeat sequentially and define the abusive dynamic.

**Stage 1: Tension Building Phase**

**Stage 2: Acute Battering Incident Phase**

**Stage 3: Honeymoon or Contrition Phase**

#### The Tension Building Phase

This initial phase is characterized by a gradual escalation of minor incidents, irritability, and stress within the relationship. The abuser becomes increasingly moody, verbally abusive, or prone to outbursts over trivial matters. The victim, sensing the mounting danger, often attempts to control the environment or modify their own behavior--walking on eggshells, isolating themselves, or attempting to please the abuser--in an effort to stave off the inevitable explosion. This period can last anywhere from days to months, marked by palpable psychological anxiety. The victim often feels responsible for managing the abuser's mood, a futile effort that reinforces the abuser's sense of control and the victim's sense of obligation.

### The Acute Battering Incident Phase

This is the stage where the abuse actually occurs. It is marked by the uncontrollable release of tension built up in the first phase and is typically the shortest stage. The incident involves severe physical, sexual, or emotional violence. The violence is explosive and often culminates when the abuser feels they have exerted complete dominance or when they feel satisfied that the tension has been adequately discharged. During this phase, the victim experiences the highest level of physical danger and psychological trauma. Importantly, the violence is rarely accidental; it is a calculated act of power assertion, often followed by a sense of clarity or release for the perpetrator.

### The Honeymoon or Contrition Phase

Following the violent incident, the abuser enters a period of calm, remorse, and often intense affection. This stage is critical to the cycle's perpetuation. The abuser may apologize profusely, promise never to repeat the behavior, shower the victim with gifts, or appeal to the victim's sympathy by claiming personal stress or substance use was the cause. The victim, still reeling from the violence and desiring the relationship to return to its positive initial state, clings to the abuser's promises. This phase reinforces the victim's hope that the abuser can genuinely change, thus psychologically binding them to the relationship. For the abuser, this contrition serves to minimize the consequences of their actions and reset the dynamic for the next cycle.

## 4. Dynamics and Progression

A critical component of the Cycle of Violence theory is its progressive nature. Walker noted that over time, the duration of the stages shifts dramatically, increasing the danger to the victim. The **Honeymoon Phase** typically diminishes in length and intensity. The abuser's remorse becomes less sincere, or they may skip the contrition altogether, moving directly from the acute incident back into the Tension Building Phase. This shrinking period of calm erodes the victim's hope and increases their sense of entrapment, leading to a state of chronic stress and fear.

Concurrently, the **Tension Building Phase** and the **Acute Battering Phase** tend to lengthen and intensify. The time between violent incidents shortens, and the severity of the violence increases. This acceleration transforms the relationship from one characterized by intermittent violence into one defined by constant low-level tension punctuated by increasingly brutal outbursts. This dynamic explains why victims often feel compelled to leave when the violence becomes life-threatening, as the initial psychological rewards (the honeymoon period) are no longer sufficient to offset the constant threat.

This acceleration also contributes significantly to the phenomenon of **Battered Woman Syndrome (BWS)**, a psychological condition often cited in legal contexts. BWS describes the psychological symptoms experienced by victims who are subjected to prolonged, repeated abuse characterized

by escalating violence and control. The predictable yet inescapable nature of the escalating cycle leads to severe symptoms of PTSD, depression, anxiety, and the aforementioned learned helplessness, where the victim believes efforts to escape or mitigate the violence are futile.

## 5. Applications and Significance

The Cycle of Violence model holds profound significance across various professional fields, most notably in clinical psychology, social work, and the legal system. Clinically, it provides a framework for therapists working with survivors, helping them to recognize that their experience is part of a pattern, not a random series of failures. This recognition is often the first step toward breaking the emotional and psychological hold the abuser maintains.

In forensic and judicial settings, the model is invaluable for explaining behavior that might otherwise appear contradictory. For example, it helps juries understand why a victim might drop charges or return to an abuser--behaviors often fueled by the hope instilled during the Honeymoon Phase or the pervasive fear developed during the Tension Building Phase. The framework validates the victim's experience and is essential in supporting petitions for restraining orders, custody rulings, and criminal prosecutions related to domestic violence.

Furthermore, the model is widely used in prevention and education programs. By teaching young people and couples to identify the early warning signs of the Tension Building Phase, intervention efforts aim to disrupt the cycle before it reaches the Acute Battering stage. Public health initiatives utilize the simplicity of the three stages to raise awareness and promote understanding of **non-physical forms of abuse** that precede and accompany physical violence.

## 6. Intergenerational Transmission and Intervention

The perpetuation of the **Cycle of Violence** often extends beyond the immediate abusive relationship, manifesting as **intergenerational trauma**. Children who witness or experience domestic violence often learn maladaptive coping mechanisms and relationship templates. They may internalize the idea that violence is a normal or acceptable component of intimate relationships, increasing the likelihood that they will become either perpetrators or victims in their adult lives.

Breaking this intergenerational pattern requires comprehensive intervention focused not only on the immediate victim but also on family systems and the perpetrator. Treatment for survivors focuses on healing trauma, rebuilding self-esteem, and counteracting learned helplessness. For perpetrators, intervention programs must address the cognitive distortions and control issues that drive the violence, aiming for accountability and behavioral modification rather than simply managing anger.

The model strongly implies that the cycle will continue indefinitely--repeating throughout generations--if the victim or proponent does not actively seek therapeutic treatment and support to stand up to the dynamic. Effective intervention involves recognizing the pattern, understanding the psychological traps (like the Honeymoon Phase), and developing safety plans that permanently interrupt the repetition of the cycle, often necessitating complete separation from the abusive partner.

## 7. Criticisms and Limitations

While highly influential, the Cycle of Violence model has faced several academic and clinical criticisms, primarily regarding its perceived linearity and generalizability. A major critique is that not all abusive relationships adhere strictly to the three-stage sequence. Some abusers may maintain a constant state of low-level tension or skip the Contrition Phase entirely, moving quickly from violence back to tension building, particularly as the abuse progresses. Critics argue that forcing every abuse pattern into this three-stage model oversimplifies the diverse reality of **coercive control**.

Furthermore, the model was initially conceptualized based predominantly on heterosexual relationships involving physical violence, leading to concerns about its universal applicability. Contemporary research suggests that the dynamics of psychological, financial, and sexual abuse, as well as abuse in LGBTQ+ relationships, may involve more complex or less distinct cyclical patterns. Some theories, such as the Duluth Model, focus more broadly on the underlying structure of power and control rather than the linear stages of emotional escalation and remorse.

Finally, some critics caution that focusing too heavily on the cycle of behavior risks diverting attention from the abuser's intentionality and responsibility. If the violence is framed merely as an inevitable release of tension, it risks minimizing the calculated choices made by the perpetrator to exert power and control over the victim. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the Cycle of Violence remains an essential heuristic tool for understanding the psychological mechanisms that keep victims bound to abusive relationships.

## Further Reading

[Lenore Walker Official Website](#)

[Wikipedia: Cycle of Violence](#)

[Psychology Dictionary: Cycle of Violence](#)

[The Duluth Model: Power and Control Wheel](#)