

Examine the cycle of abuse and its impact on victims. How can this cycle be broken, and what role does early intervention play?

The cycle of abuse, often referred to as the “cycle of violence” is a conceptual framework that describes the pattern of behavior commonly observed in abusive relationships. It was first identified by psychologist Lenore Walker in the late 1970’s. Walker in the 1970’s, is central to identifying the dynamics that characterize many abusive situations (Gillette, 2022). The cycle typically consists of three main stages. The first stage being the Tension-Building stage, this stage is typically where stress and strain build on the relationship. The cycle of abuse is critically important in understanding and addressing abusive relationships, as it explains the recurring patterns of behavior that keep victims trapped and allow the abuse to persist. The abuser may display increasing irritability, anger, or hostility and minor incidents of abuse can occur. The victim often feels the need to placate the abuser to avoid escalation, leading to heightened anxiety (Rakovec-Felser, 2014). The cycle of abuse is important because it helps explain how and why abusive relationships persist, offering insight into both the behavior of abusers and the psychological impact on victims. The next stage being the Acute incident stage which involves a significant act of violence or abuse. The abuser may physically harm the victim or engage in severe emotional or psychological abuse. This phase is often explosive and can lead to serious injuries or trauma. It is marked by a significant escalation in tension and results in an overt act of violence or aggression (Columbia, 2023). Lastly, the honeymoon stage after the last, the abuser may show remorse, apologies, and engage in behaviors designed to win back the victim’s trust. This can include gifts, affection, or promises to change, this can provide the victims with relief that they feel and hope for improvement, leading them to stay in the relationship. This stage can be emotionally confusing for victims because it contrasts sharply with the earlier abusive behavior (Radell et al, 2021). Understanding how this cycle manifests in the context of adult-child relationships is essential for recognizing the implications for child development, psychological well-being, and the potential for perpetuating cycles of abuse across generations.

This essay will critically examine the impact of the cycle of abuse on victims, particularly both adults and children whilst exploring the profound psychological, emotional and physical consequences they endure. By analyzing the repetitive nature of abusive patterns such as the tension-building, acute incident, and honeymoon phases. This essay will illuminate how these cycles perpetuate abuse and entrap victims. Additionally, it will focus on strategies to break the cycle, emphasizing the importance of comprehensive interventions, including therapeutic, legal and social approaches. Particular attention will be given to the role of early intervention, highlighting how timely identification and support can disrupt the cycle and prevent further harm. This essay argues that the cycle of abuse in domestic violence characterized by recurring phases of tension, violence, reconciliation, and a temporary “honeymoon” profoundly affects victims’ mental and physical well-being, creating barriers to leaving abusive relationships. Through early intervention strategies, such as awareness programs, social support services, and proactive law enforcement responses, this cycle can be disrupted, offering victims the necessary resources and empowerment to break free and fostering long-term prevention of abuse (Murphy, 2024).

When discussing the cycle of abuse and its impact on adults and children, the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 provides a critical legal framework to address and intervene in the cycle of abuse, protecting victims and offering pathways to escape abusive relationships. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 is instrumental in disrupting the cycle of abuse for both adults and children, providing protections that address the complex patterns of harm within abusive relationships (Home Office, 2022). By recognizing non-physical forms of abuse, such as coercive control, the Act acknowledges how abusers often manipulate, isolate, and dominate their victims psychologically, creating trauma bonds that make it difficult for them to leave. For children, the Act also emphasizes the psychological harm caused by witnessing abuse, recognizing that exposure to these cycles can lead to long-term attachment issues and mental health struggles (Margolin and Vickerman, 2007).

The cycle of abuse, a concept initially developed by psychologists Dr. Lenore Walker in her 1979 book “The battered Woman”, describes a recurring pattern of abusive behaviors within intimate relationships (Walker, 1979). This cycle is marked by four primary phases, tension

building, acute violence, reconciliation and the calm phase. Walker's theory is grounded in her extensive research on domestic violence, which revealed that abuse follows a predictable and self-perpetuating pattern, trapping victims in a continuous loop that is difficult to escape (Kyle, 2022). The first stage is the tension-building phase in this initial phase, tension accumulates as minor conflicts, verbal aggression, or controlling behavior intensify. Victims often feel anxious and attempt to placate or appease the abuser, in hopes of preventing a violent incident. According to Walker, this phase is psychologically taxing, as victims may internalize a sense of responsibility for the abuser's behavior (Gander-Zaucker, 2021). To prevent the conflict from escalating to physical violence or more severe abuse, this may involve adjusting their own behavior complying with demands or avoiding certain actions perceived as potential triggers (Raypole, 2020). However, this strategy rarely prevents progression to the next phase of abuse. Instead, it fosters a psychological state of hypervigilance and fear in the victims often described as "walking on eggshells". The prolonged anxiety and anticipation of violence in the tension-building phase contribute to feelings of helplessness and emotional exhaustion, which reinforce the victim's vulnerability and dependence on the abuser. Early intervention is particularly crucial in the tension-building phase, as it offers a window of opportunity to disrupt the cycle before violence escalates. By identifying signs of verbal aggression, controlling behavior, or heightened anxiety in victims, support systems – such as mental health professionals, social workers or police officers can step in to provide resources and guidance (Early Intervention Foundation, 2023). Understanding the dynamics of the tension-building phase underscores the importance of early intervention as a means of breaking the cycle and mitigating the long-term impact on victims. In the context of adult-child relationships, the tension-building phase often involves escalating behaviors by adults that create an atmosphere of anxiety and fear for the child (Birditt et al., 2009). This phase can be characterized by increased irritability, criticism, or controlling behavior from adults. Children, particularly younger ones, may be unable to articulate their feelings or comprehend the adult's emotional state, leading to them to feel a constant sense of apprehension (Beesdo, Knappe and Pine, 2009).

Within the cycle of abuse between adults and children, the second phase – often referred to as the acute incident phase. It is marked by an escalation of abusive behaviors that can take

various forms, including physical violence, verbal assaults, emotional manipulation, or neglect (Social care institute for excellence, 2015). This phase is characterized by a significant increase in aggression and intensity, which leaves a deep and lasting impact on the child's psychological and emotional well-being. This phase is when abusive behavior intensifies and escalates into direct acts of aggression or harm. Within adult relationships, this could involve physical violence, such as hitting or restraining as well as intense threats (Home Office, 2022b). As tension escalates, conflicts boil over into direct, aggressive acts, which can include physical violence, severe verbal assaults, emotional manipulation and even threats or coercive tactics (Hammett, Karney and Bradbury, 2021). Understanding this phase and its implications allows society to develop more effective intervention strategies, provide necessary resources, and promote education on healthy relationships.

In child-adult relationships it may include physical punishments, emotional manipulation, extreme criticism, or withdrawal of necessities which can leave children feeling frightened and helpless. In child-adult relationships, the cycle of abuse manifests in ways that profoundly affect a child's psychological and emotional development (NSPCC, 2023). During the acute incident phase, abusive behaviors by adults can range from physical punishment to intense verbal berating or neglect, all of which leave a deep and lasting impact on the child. Research shows that exposure to acute abusive incidents can lead to developmental issues, including anxiety, depression, behavioral problems and difficulties with attachment (Downey and Crummy, 2021). The acute incident phase is typically the shortest yet most intense stage in the cycle and can inflict lasting emotional and psychological damage on victims.

After this phase the abuser often shifts into the third phase, known as the reconciliation or honeymoon phase, where they may apologize, offer gifts or make promises to change, temporarily deescalating the situation before the cycle begins again. During this phase, the abuser may express remorse, offer apologies or make gestures of affection to restore the victim's trust and mitigate the impact of their prior behavior (REFUGE, 2019). In adult relationships, the honeymoon phase can be highly persuasive as it reinforces the emotional bond between the abuser and the victim. During this time, the abuser may employ various

tactics to regain control, such as expressing deep regret, blaming external factors for their behavior, or highlighting the good aspects of the relationship (Comms, 2024).

Psychological research on attachment theory indicates that these patterns of reconciliation can create a traumatic bond, making it difficult for victims to leave the relationships even when they recognize the harmful dynamics (developer, 2024). Psychological research on attachment theory reveals that the cycle of reconciliation within abusive relationships can foster a deeply entrenched traumatic bond, known as “trauma bonding,” which significantly complicates a victims' ability to leave, even when they are fully aware of the harm (Raypole, 2020b). Attachment theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the dynamics of the cycle of abuse in both adult and child relationships.

Attachment theory, first developed by John Bowlby, explains how early relationships with caregivers shape an individual's expectations and behaviors in later relationships, as well as their overall capacity to form bonds (Brodie, 2024). In abusive relationships, the cycle of abuse comprising tension-building, acute incident and honeymoon phases interacts with attachment needs in complex ways, creating attachment styles that sustain and perpetuate the abuse (Cherry, 2023). In the form of cycle of abuse for adults and children, adults with insecure attachment styles may seek comfort and validation from the same partner who harms them, feeling compelled to stay in the relationship despite recognizing its toxicity however, on the other hand for children, attachment theory explains how exposure to the cycle of abuse disrupts the healthy attachment development needed for security and self-esteem (Papalia and Widom, 2023). The inconsistency in care leads to confusion about the reliability of relationships and can have long-lasting effects on their mental health and self-worth. As they grow, these children may carry forward patterns of insecure attachment, often seeking relationships that mirror the instability they experienced (Dagan et al., 2021).

Recognizing the role of attachment theory in the cycle of abuse underscores the need for attachment-aware interventions. In adult relationships, therapeutic approaches that address trauma bonding, such as cognitive behavioral therapy and trauma focused therapy can help victims understand the impact of attachment needs on their responses to abuse (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014). For children, early interventions such as counseling and stable, supportive caregiving environments, can help them develop healthier attachment

styles. By Providing consistent and predictable support, caregivers, therapists and community programs can counteract the impact of abuse on attachment and foster the development of secure bonds, helping to break the intergenerational cycle of abuse (NSPCC, 2021). Breaking the cycle of abuse for both adults and children requires a comprehensive, multifaced approach that addresses the psychological, social and structural aspects of abusive dynamics (Greene et al., 2020). This statement means that to truly stop the cycle of abuse for both adults and children, solutions need to go beyond just addressing the immediate physical or emotional harm, instead effective intervention should tackle multiple layers that contribute to or reinforce abusive relationships. For adults breaking free often starts with recognizing the patterns of abuse, understanding trauma bonding seeking support systems seeking support such as counseling support groups whilst children, early intervention is crucial, providing stable, supportive, environments whether through social services or extended family can help counteract the negative effects of an abusive caregiver (Porter, 2024). By combining psychological support with practical resources and community-based intervention, we can provide a path toward healing and resilience for those impacted by abuse.

In conclusion, the cycle of abuse is a complex pattern that profoundly affects both adults and children, shaping their psychological health, attachment styles, and relational patterns. Through the lens of attachment theory, we can understand how abuse entangles victims in traumatic bonds that make it difficult to escape, regardless of age. Breaking this cycle requires a comprehensive approach that addresses the psychological, social, and structural dimensions of abuse. For adults, therapeutic support, social networks, and legal resources are essential for rebuilding self-worth and fostering resilience. For children, early intervention, stable caregiving and counseling provide the foundation for healthy development and secure attachment. By combining trauma-informed support with community and systemic resources, society can offer victims a path toward healing and prevention of future abuse, ultimately creating safer and more supportive environments for both adults and children.

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