

UNDERSTANDING ABUSE

Pence (1987) highlighted the importance of educating women about the dynamics of abuse as well as informing them about the common responses of experiencing violence in an intimate relationship. When women are assisted to increase their understanding of abuse they are more likely to view their experiences as part of a larger societal issue. They are less likely to assume blame for the situations that they find themselves in.

As a counsellor in a shelter, you have an important role to play in educating women accessing your services about the dynamics of abuse. The following definitions may be helpful in your work with women.

OBJECTIVES:

-To become familiar with the dynamics of violence.

-To understand the cycle of violence, the power and control wheel as well as the equality wheel

FAMILY VIOLENCE: "is the abuse of power within relationships of family, trust or dependency that endangers the survival, security or well-being of another person. It can include many forms of abuse, including spousal abuse, elder abuse and neglect, child abuse and neglect, child sexual abuse, parent abuse, and witnessing abuse of others in the family. Family violence may include some or all of the following behaviours: physical abuse, psychological abuse, criminal harassment/stalking, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, financial abuse and spiritual abuse" (edited from the Round Table on Family Violence and Bullying – Finding Solutions Together 2004 (ACWS website).

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: Calgary Domestic Violence Committee defines domestic violence as "the attempt, act or intent of someone within a relationship, where the relationship is characterized by intimacy, dependency or trust, to intimidate either by threat or by the use of physical force on another person or property. The purpose of the abuse is to control another through neglect, intimidation, inducement of fear or by inflicting pain. Abusive behaviours can take many forms including: verbal, physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, spiritual, economic and the violation of rights. All forms of abusive behaviour are ways in which one human being is trying to have control and/or exploit or have power over another" (Calgary Domestic Violence Committee, 2003, p. 5-6).

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life." "...violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women." (UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, 1993).

These definitions clearly outline the power imbalance between men and women as a root cause of violence against women. All forms of abusive behaviour are methods by which one person attempts to have control and/or power over another.

Other terms used to describe abuse between intimate partners include spousal abuse, wife battering, woman abuse and intimate partner violence.

Abuse occurs in many relationships regardless of age, socioeconomic status, gender, religion or ethnicity. Abuse often escalates from emotional abuse to physical abuse. The goal of abuse is to maintain power and control over another. When the usual methods of control are not effective the abusive individual may resort to more aggressive means of controlling. Abuse may take place while individuals are in a relationship, when they are in a process of breaking up or after the relationship ends. Abuse is always the responsibility of the abusive individual – as he or she makes a choice about the abusive behaviour.

TYPES OF ABUSE

1. **PHYSICAL ABUSE:** is the use of physical force against another individual that results in injuries or put the other at risk of being injured. It includes such behaviours as restraining, slapping, pushing, punching, grabbing, scratching, biting, pinching, kicking, and assault with a weapon, confinement, and murder.
2. **EMOTIONAL ABUSE:** is directed at an individual's sense of self. Emotional abusive behaviours include swearing, screaming, insulting an individual or the individual's family, criticizing, accusing someone of cheating. Emotional abuse is usually inflicted by verbal abuse.
3. **PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE:** This includes such behaviours as isolation, threats, bullying and intimidation, harassment, coercion, use of force, insults, threatening to commit suicide, throwing or breaking a woman's personal items. Psychological abuse may result in a woman feeling helpless and afraid.
4. **SEXUAL ABUSE:** refers to any non-consenting sexual act or behaviour. Calling someone sexual names, manipulating an individual into sexual acts, criticizing a woman sexually are forms of sexual abuse. Withholding sex and affection as a means of control are also sexually abusive. Sexual abuse can occur within an intimate relationship.
5. **FINANCIAL (ECONOMIC) ABUSE:** refers to using money as a means of attempting to control another individual. It may include attempting to or making a person dependent by controlling all of the household income, withholding money or access to money; preventing the individual from working or going to school, or forcing the individual to be the sole wage earner and not being responsible with the household money – spending money on drugs/alcohol or gambling the money that is needed for the family.
6. **SPIRITUAL ABUSE:** includes behaviours that intend to belittle and undermine a person's faith or religious beliefs. It may also include preventing a person from participating in religious or spiritual practices or using an individual's beliefs as a means of manipulation. It may also involve forcing an individual to adhere to a belief system that is imposed upon her. (Adapted from: YWCA Paths of Change Women's Group Counselling Manual, 2005 and the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters website www.acws.ca).

THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE:

The cycle of violence is a term that refers to the pattern in which intimate partner abuse often occurs (Walker, 1979). Lenore Walker in the Battered Woman (1979) outlined a three stage cycle of abuse in which each stage, while varied in length, is completed before the next stage begins. The three stages as identified by Lenore Walker are:

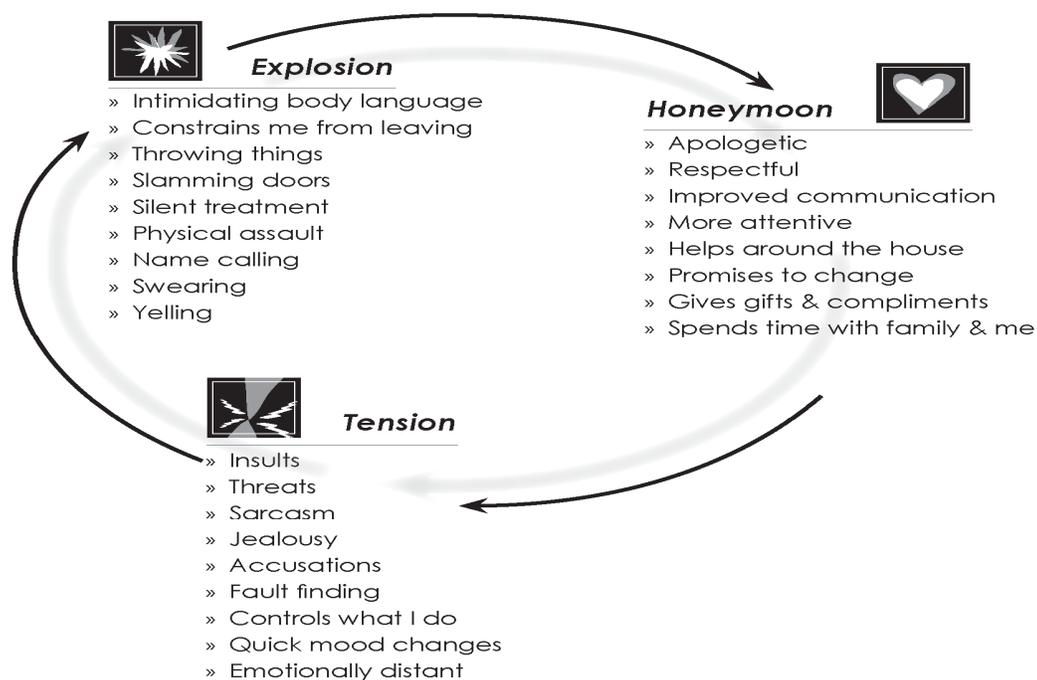
Tension Building: During this phase the individual that has been abusive begins to demonstrate signs of increased tension. The abusive individual may use increasingly use insults and putdowns and may attempt to isolate his partner more than usual. Many women are aware that an explosion is going to occur. This stage has been referred to as walking on eggshells. Some women have shared that they have knowingly triggered an explosion in order to have it over with as they know that is will be inevitable.

Explosive Event: This incident may last a few minutes or go on for an extended period of time. There may be physical or sexual violence during this phase as well as psychological abuse. The individual who becomes abusive may appear to be out of control but that is usually not the case. The individual is making a choice. The individual being abused has little or no control over what the other person will do. She is often feeling powerless and terrified.

Honeymoon or loving and contrite stage: The individual perpetrating the abuse may apologize, show kindness, and promise that the abuse will never happen again. The individual that has been abused often wants to believe that the abuse will not happen again and feels hopeful for the relationship. Later the abusive individual may deny the severity of the abuse, minimize what happened, make excuses or blame his partner for his abusive behaviours.

Over time this cycle may speed up – the violence may become more frequent and more severe. The honeymoon period often becomes shorter or nonexistent. Without intervention, the abuse is likely to get worse. This cycle appears to occur in many but not all relationships where there is abuse.

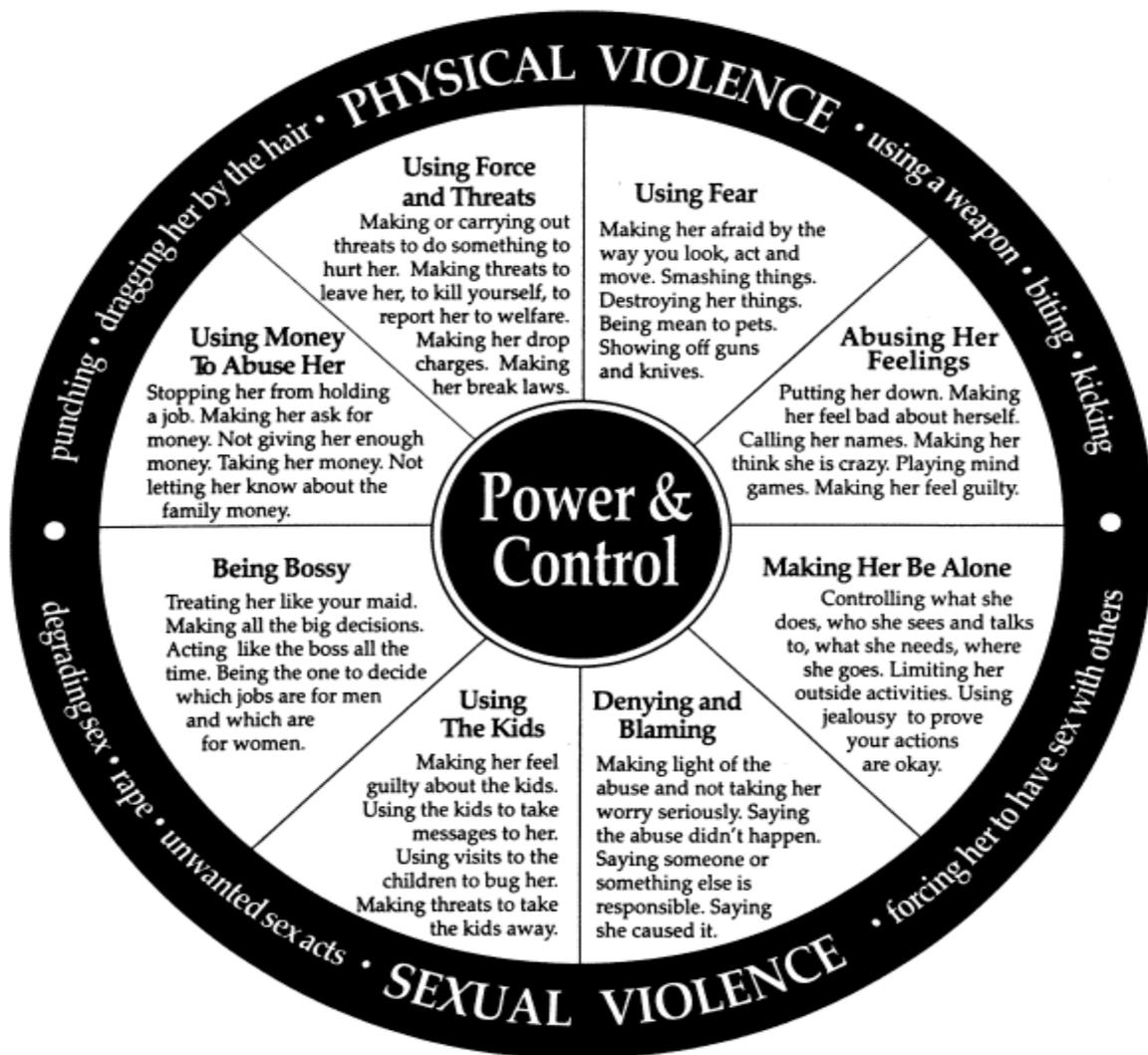
This cycle, according to Walker (1979), helps explain why women remain in abusive relationships. The realization that an abusive relationship has a pattern and is not made up of isolated incidents is an important contribution to the understanding of abuse. By understanding this pattern, women may begin to understand that many of their partners' behaviours are intended to control them.



POWER AND CONTROL WHEEL

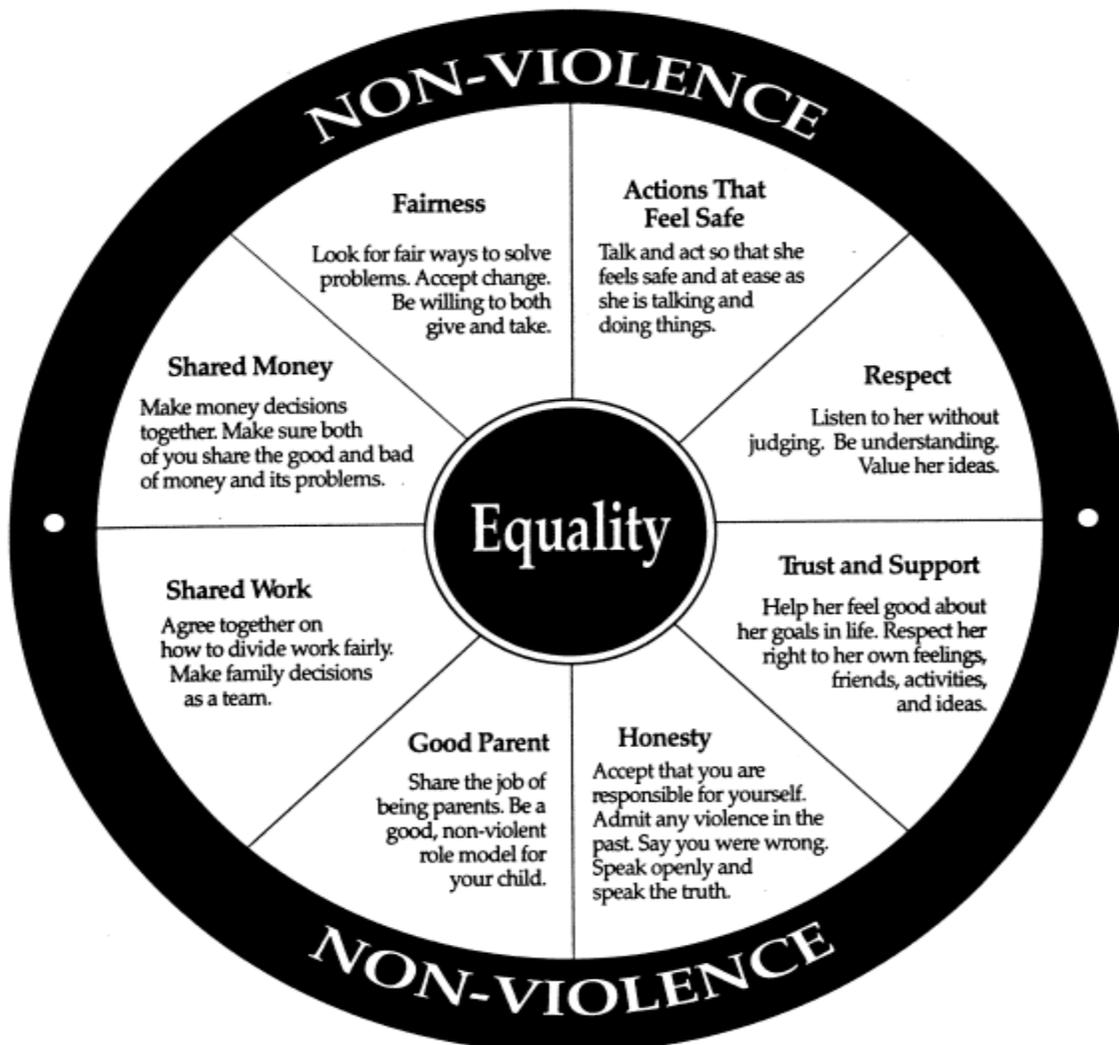
The Duluth Model presents a graphic depiction of what behaviours constitute controlling behaviour. The Duluth curriculum is based on feminist principles and was developed by women in Duluth that had been abused by their partners and who were attending a women's education group program facilitated by the women's shelter.

The Power and Control Wheel is a visual representation of an abusive relationship that is based on the power that one individual has over another. In the inside of the wheel are behaviours that fit within the categories of emotional or psychological abuse, while the use of physical or sexual violence is on the outside of the wheel.



EQUITY WHEEL

The Equality Wheel lists the concepts in relationships that promote respect, equality and demonstrate appropriate ways of interacting in healthy relationships and ways that people who abuse can now choose to act non-violently.



Adapted from the Duluth Institute

Duluth also developed the Equality Wheel which is a visual representation of a healthy relationship. In order to maintain equality in a relationship both partners engage in behaviours that result in a respectful, nonviolent relationship.

Presenting women in the shelter with the visual of an abusive relationship can result in powerful insights. The Power and Control Wheel can open up a dialogue that facilitates a process by which a woman may gain a greater understanding of the abuse in her relationship. It may assist her to assign responsibility for the abuse to her partner rather than assuming the blame for the abuse in the relationship.

THEORIES OF DOMESTIC ABUSE:

1. **INDIVIDUAL MODELS:** link the cause for violence to the psychological characteristics of individual abusers and victim/survivors. These models attribute violence primarily to characteristics of the abusive individual and to a lesser degree those of the victim. Early research on factors predicting domestic violence focused on the psychopathology of abusers. Later studies indicated that individual psychopathology accounts for only a small number of abuse situations.
 - 1) **PSYCHO PATHOLOGY THEORY:** The psychopathology explanation of violence towards women suggests that individuals that engage in abusive behaviours have personality disorders or mental illnesses. Some studies have indicated that men who engage in violent behaviours have low self-esteem (Gondolf, 1988), are overly jealous (Holtzworth-Monroe, Stuart & Hutchinson, 1997), have aggressive personality types (Heyman, O'Leary, & Jouriles, 1995) experience high incidents of stressful events (Strauss et al, 1980), are more likely than non-abusive men to blame their partners for their behaviours (Holtzworth,-Monroe & Hutchinson, 1993) and have poor communication and social skills (Murphy, Meyer & O'Leary, 1994). Dutton and Strachan (1987) found that men who had been abusive had greater needs for power. They suggest that this need for power stems from their issues of low self-esteem and feeling that they have little control in their lives. Elevated depression has been observed in individuals that have been abusive towards their partners (Vivian & Malone, 1997). Dutton (1994) found that men who had been abusive had narcissistic personality types; they were more anxious about abandonment than other men, had greater difficulties committing to relationships and had greater dependency issues than other men. Criticism of this theory is that the importance of social structure is minimized and these theories tend to minimize the abusive individual's responsibility for his behaviours. On the other hand, out of this theory there have been a number of male batterer typologies that have been developed in an effort to match prevention, intervention and treatment efforts with different types of individuals that engage in abusive behaviours. There is some evidence that these typologies are useful in designing treatment programs.
 - 2) **BIOLOGICAL MODEL:** This model suggests that male sexual jealousy, a characteristic common to men who have been abusive, evolved to maximize their reproductive abilities (Burgess & Draper, 1989). Researches have also studied the effects of childhood attention deficit disorders, head injuries and various biochemical factors such as testosterone and serotonin levels upon relationship aggression. It has been suggested that the connection between head injuries and violence is due to damage to specific parts of the brain resulting in lowered impulse control. Rosenbaum et al (1994) found that 50% of abusive men in their study had experienced a closed head injury compared to non-abusive men. The main criticism of the use of the biological model to explain domestic abuse is that social factors are not considered and there is a tendency to minimize the abusive individuals' responsibility for their behaviours.

- 3) **PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY:** Psychoanalytic theory has maintained that masochism is the primary motivating factor in abusive relationships. This theory is now mostly obsolete in the therapeutic community. There is no empirical research to substantiate the idea that erotic enjoyment of pain through battering is a trait found in abused women (Okun, 1986).

2. SYSTEMS THEORY: Systems theory suggests abuse is part of a violence-prone system. Proponents of this theory believe that abuse attempts to return the family back to a “normal” (equilibrium) state of functioning. The violence is a maladaptive but efficient means of keeping the system in homeostasis (Wiehe, 1998). Since all family members are part of the system, they are all responsible for the family’s dysfunction. Treatment is usually in the form of marital or family counselling that is sometimes preceded by gender specific counselling. Interventions are directed at the development of interpersonal skills. Criticism of this perspective points to the tendency to blame women for their own victimization and there tends to be a minimization of the responsibility of the individual who has engaged in abusive behaviours.

3. FEMINIST THEORY: Feminist theory views abuse as a social problem related to the patriarchal structure of society. Issues of power and control set up an imbalance of power which puts women at a psychological and economic disadvantage. Feminist theory stresses that historically male dominated social structures and socialization practices result in gender specific roles which reinforce a subordinate position of women (Smith, 1990). Critics argue that feminist theory does not explain why only a small percentage of men use violence against women despite a social structure dominated by patriarchy. There is also some criticism that this model does not explain violence by women. Despite these criticisms feminist theory has been fundamental in the development of women’s shelters, interventions for women impacted by domestic violence as well as many of the treatment programs for men who have been abusive (Tutty & Goard, 2002).

4. SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY: Within the context of violence against women, social learning theory, also termed the intergenerational transmission of violence, suggests that that violence is learned in the socialization of the family (O’Leary, 1988, Strauss et al, 1980), This perspective suggests that those experiencing or witnessing abuse in their family-of-origin learn that violence is a way of getting what they want. Dumas, Margolis, & John (1994) found that men exposed to violence in their childhoods were more likely to perpetrate domestic violence and women who observed violence in their family –of-origin were more likely to experience violence in an intimate relationship. The family is seen as the training ground for abuse and learning how to be in relationships.

The social learning perspective in isolation from other theories does not explain why the intergenerational transfer of violence is not universal and why some individuals who are abusive do not report histories of exposure to violence in their families- of- origin. Kaufman & Ziegler (1987) state that the rate of intergenerational transmission of violence is only 30% and 70% of individuals that witness or experience violence do not engage in violent behaviours. Proponents of social learning theory counter this argument by acknowledging that although their theory does not explain all violence, individuals experiencing violence as children are at an increased risk of engaging in violent behaviour as adults (Straus, 1991).

The social learning concept of learned helplessness (Walker, 1984) suggests that women learn helplessness through the socialization process and internalize the traditional sex roles from role modeling that hold women responsible for the well being of the family. This theory proposes that women stay in abusive relationships because they have been conditioned to believe they cannot predict their own safety and that nothing they do will alter the situation. Walker suggests that over time, through continuous conditioning, a

battered woman syndrome emerges causing the woman to lose hope and feel completely incapable of dealing with her situation.

Walker (1984, 1989, 2000) outlines a number of factors in childhood and adulthood that contribute to learned helplessness. Childhood factors include: witnessing or experiencing battering, sexual abuse or molestation, health problems or chronic illness, stereotypical sex roles and rigid tradition. She stated that these experiences teach children that they have little control in their lives and that external factors prescribe what happens in their lives. In adulthood, the behaviour of the abusive individual tends to reinforce the victim's belief that she is unable to escape her situation.

The term helplessness has caused an uproar among feminists because they view this negative term as portraying women in a victim role with little empowerment. According to Walker (1989) women are not helpless in the standard sense of the word. She states that learned helplessness means that women who are abused choose behavioural responses that have the highest possibility of causing them the least harm in a known situation. Gondolf and Fisher (1988) call this the survivor hypotheses and suggest that women become very active and resourceful in protecting themselves and their children.

SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY: This theory examines how social structure affects individuals and their behaviour (Gelles & Leseke, 1993). Sociological theory analyzes sociocultural features that create a high risk for violence in the family such as family isolation, unemployment, education, pregnancy, alcohol problems, parental modeling and financial stressors. The sociological theory suggests that the fewer resources a woman has the more likely she is to become stuck in an abusive relationship.

EXCHANGE THEORY: This model suggests that an individual's behaviour is either to earn rewards or to avoid punishment (Homans, 1967). Actions are determined by a calculated assessment of risk vs. reward. Using this theory to explain domestic abuse, relationships are seen as involving each partner offering the other various services and benefits such as affection, money, love, and sex dependent upon the partner giving back desirable responses such as praise, attention and love. Based on this theory, one partner may exert force in the relationship in order to get his/her needs met. If he/she does not receive any consequences for that behaviour, he/she will then perceive violence as a tactic to control his/her partner (Gelles, 1983). Exchange theory also suggests that women who experience abuse in an intimate relationship may attempt to avoid violence by complying with their partners' every demand. Periodic affection by the abusive individual tends to act as reinforcement and the abused woman may be obedient in order to gain further rewards.

MULTI-DIMENSIONAL THEORIES

All of the above explanations for violence against women have some element of usefulness. It appears that a more eclectic view of the causation of violence of women may be useful. Recently, research on violence against women has evolved from focusing upon a specific part of the issue to more multi-dimensional theories which consider social structure factors as well as individual characteristics (James, 2008).

Within the shelter movement, **feminist theory** provides the broad over riding framework for service delivery (Tutty & Goard, 2002). In addition, social learning theory has provided an understanding of the cyclic nature of domestic abuse. As Tutty and Goard (2002) point out, a number of the above theoretical perspective can be utilized to explain why women are abused or might choose to stay with an abusive partner.

BARRIERS TO LEAVING AN ABUSIVE PARTNER

- Women experiencing domestic violence encounter a variety of barriers when faced with the thought of leaving their relationships.
- A study by Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh and Lewis (2000) states that two thirds of the women in their study had left their partners at least once, others more frequently and 25% more than five times. The reasons cited for staying with an abusive partner were concerns regarding their children, wanting the relationship to work, partners' promises to change and lack of money or access to shelter.
- A frequently asked question is "Why didn't she leave the relationship? And why did she go back to him after a separation?" Such questions often include an implicit prejudice that the woman is actually seeking violence. It is important to understand that a woman never stays in a relationship because of the violence she experiences. It is important to view each situation as unique and it is essential to take the individual situation into account and to respond in a sensitive empathic manner in order to understand the situation and to empower the individual woman to make an informed decision about her situation.
- Barnett (2001) argues that women who have been abused face numerous obstacles in leaving an abusive relationship. She states that many of these barriers are external and not due to individual problems with women. Examples of external barriers include the patriarchal structure of society in which men often control all of the families' resources leaving women economically powerless. Another example is child custody and access issues. Some women fear that they may lose custody of their children if they leave the relationship. Other women believe that they are better able to keep their children safe if they remain in the relationship rather than hand them over to their partners for court ordered visitation.
- Separation is a difficult process that takes time. Marriage or being in an intimate partnership and being part of a family are highly valued in our society and the decision to leave a relationship is a difficult one. Women often spend time looking at the positive and the negative impacts of such a drastic move. The more bonds (i.e. children and property) that tie two individuals together the more difficult it is to end the relationship. In families, where traditional patriarchal values are adhered to, women have little freedom to leave their partners and to live independent lives.
- Many women want the violence to end but do not want to end the relationship. Every woman has the right to determine for herself whether or not she wants to leave a relationship or not. It is a personal decision that needs to be supported by staff. Every woman should be given the opportunity to develop a safety plan specific to her needs with the support of a counsellor.
- Many women return to partners where there has been violence due to a lack of resources and housing challenges. Women have shared that the fears of being on their own are greater than the fear of living with an individual that is abusive.
- Some women fear further violence if they leave a relationship. It has been well documented that the time of separation is a high risk factor for further violence.

- Some women have endured ongoing abuse which may have impacted their sense of self. They may not feel strong enough to begin the process of leaving an unhealthy relationship. Women can begin to heal from the impacts of abuse while living in an unhealthy environment which in turn may impact their decisions to eventually leave an unhealthy situation.



INFORMATION TO THINK ABOUT

Following is a list of both internal and external barriers women have identified that have made it difficult to leave an abusive relationship: (Adapted from Barnett (2001) and the Centre for Relationship Abuse Awareness and the Central Alberta Women’s Emergency Shelter website.

Lack of financial resources: Woman often don’t have access to financial resources; their partners may have controlled all the finances

Isolation: many women are isolated in abusive relationships therefore they lack support from **family, friends and community resources**

Fear: Many women are afraid of what might happen if they were to leave the relationship; some are afraid of being alone; others are afraid of retaliation

Threats: Sometimes the abusive partner may threaten to commit suicide or to hurt their partner and/or their children, other loved ones, or family pets. Some threaten to contact Immigration Services or “out” their partners (gay relationships).

Lack of resources or information about available resources. Many women do not have information about the resources that may be able to provide practical, financial or emotional support for them.

Love and concern for their partners’ well-being: Many women care about what happens to their partners despite the abuse that they have received from them. Some are concerned that if they leave and talk about the abuse their partners may be arrested, go to jail, be deported, etc.

Hope and belief that the partner will change.

Cultural, religious and family pressure to remain in the relationship.

Shame and guilt: many women feel ashamed about the abuse that they have experienced and believe that the abuse occurred because of something they did or because of who they are. There are social stigmas around being a victim of domestic violence, as well as around divorce and single parenthood.

Depression: women who live with abuse are often depressed which makes it difficult to have the energy to plan and leave a relationship.

Many women desire to provide their children with a two parent family; some may stay because they believe that their children are safer if they stay in the relationship where they can oversee their partner’s interaction with the children

For some women learned helplessness may be a barrier to leaving an abusive relationship. Some women believe that they could not make it on their own.



THROUGH HER EYES

CASE EXAMPLES:

1. Wendy was a young single mom of two boys when she met Ron. He was charming and appeared to genuinely care for her boys. Wendy shared that things were great in the relationship for about six months and then Ron became increasingly controlling wanting to know where she was at all times, criticizing her parenting and calling her names. Wendy became aware that Ron was using cocaine and she let him know that she was not pleased that he was spending family money on his drug habit. Before long, Wendy said Ron began forcing her to have sexual intercourse with groups of men in return for money to feed his drug habit. Wendy said she began using as a way of numbing herself in order for her to be with these other men. Ron started calling Wendy names telling her she was dirty and contaminated and no one else would want her. Wendy said that at times she desperately wanted to leave the relationship but she shared that she felt such shame she became to believe that she deserved the abuse. It wasn't until Ron grabbed one of her sons and pushed him that Wendy fled with her children to a neighbor's home. The neighbor called the police and Wendy and her children were taken to a shelter. Wendy told the frontline counsellor she knew that she could not go back to her partner because she realized how dangerous the situation was.

2. Laura had just celebrated her 25th wedding anniversary. She was unhappy in the relationship with her husband, Bill for most of the 25 years. She reported that the abuse in the relationship became worse after her second child left home the year prior. Laura had stayed home to raise their children and had devoted herself to keeping a clean and orderly home. Laura had no friends and had limited contact with her family that lived in another city. She often thought about living on her own but she had not worked since having their first daughter 22 years ago and did not believe that she could support herself. Bill had controlled all of the finances throughout their marriage. Laura was not aware of the community resources that were available to support her. She felt that her situation was hopeless.

3. Betty and John had been married for five years. Shortly after their marriage John had accepted a transfer to another city. Betty missed her family and friends and tried hard to establish supports in her new community. Their daughter was born after two years of marriage and Betty decided to stay home with her. John was rarely home and when he was he began drinking excessively. Betty was often frightened by his aggressiveness but tended to overlook a lot of John's behaviours. Betty had been raised by her mom after her dad left when she was two. Betty desperately wanted a family and wanted her daughter to have a father in her life. Sometimes John was very loving and attentive to Betty and she hoped that if she tried harder he would change his abusive behaviours towards her.



TO THINK ABOUT

Frontline counsellors working with the three women described above would work differently with each woman. Wendy is sure that she wants to end the relationship. She will need lots of information about the impacts of abuse and support to understand the control that her partner had over her. It will be important for Wendy to receive information about the impacts of abuse on her children and be connected to supports for the children. Wendy likely is experiencing trauma and once she is settled in her own home would benefit from a referral to counsellor familiar with trauma and addiction issues.

Laura will require lots of support and a detailed safety plan if she decides to return to her partner. Laura will benefit from being connected to a support group for older women impacted by domestic abuse.

Betty is confused about her relationship and it will be helpful for her to examine the challenges as well as the benefits of remaining in her relationship. She will need to be informed about the impacts of violence on children. Betty would also benefit from learning about the dynamics of abuse as well as the cycle of violence.

Think about how you would work differently with each of these three women.

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