

Safety & Wellness in Conflictual Relationships

Why Does it Keep Happening? The Cycle of Abuse

One of the reasons that people stay in abusive relationships for so long is that it's often not terrible all the time. There are often periods of calm, or even good times, when the relationship appears to have hope. At these times the person who is being abused holds out hope that things have changed, that the relationship can be saved.

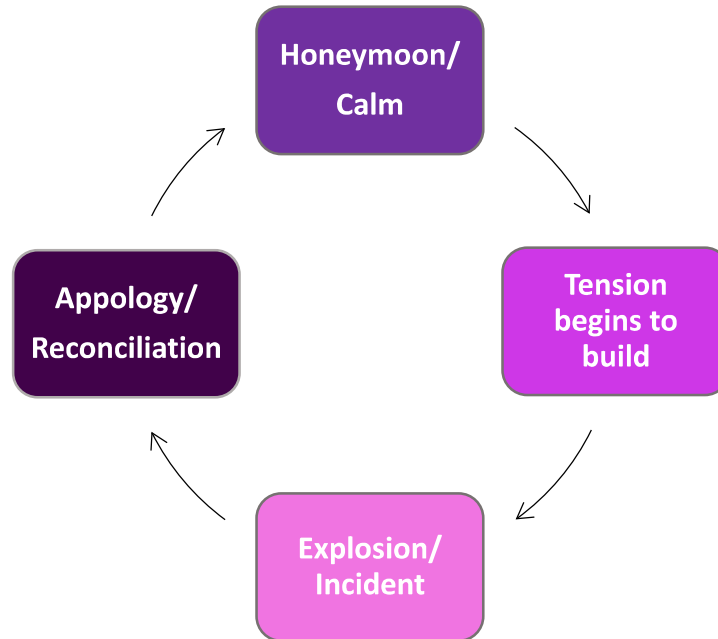
I remember having a session with my counsellor after having worked with her for over a month. I'd come to accept that the relationship I was in was an abusive relationship, I'd even spoken with my partner about it, and things were calm. I really believed that things were going to change! I believed that my partner had recognized the abusive behavior and that we were going to be able to work on our relationship and change the patterns of behavior.

My counsellor seemed less convinced of this. She explained to me the cycle of abuse. Those calm times, honeymoon times, times where the relationship seemed to still have hope, are common in abusive relationships and they are part of the abuse cycle. My counsellor told me to expect that things would escalate again. I wanted to believe that she was wrong. I wanted to believe that this time we really had turned a corner. She was right and I was wrong. Within less than a week there was another explosion. I went back to counselling the next week and told my counsellor, she was sympathetic, but not surprised.

I work with many people now who are in or leaving domestic violence relationships. Most of them still love their partner (or recent ex-partner). Many of them want to believe during the calm/honeymoon period that things have changed and that this time it will be different. It can be hard to let go of someone that you love, have children with, and a home with.

Other people can even become addicted to the rollercoaster ride that domestic violence relationships can feel like. That does not mean that they like or enjoy the abuse, but they might enjoy the intensity of the "make-up" or "honeymoon" phase.

There are 4 phases to the cycle of abuse:



1) **Honeymoon/ Calm phase**

This is a time of peace and calm in the relationship. The abuser might make a lot of effort to be charming and affectionate. The couple might have fun together. This is the public persona that the couple want others to see so this is a time when the couple might go out more.

The abuser often feels calm and in control at this time.

2) **Tension Begins to Build**

Victims of abuse often describe this time as “feeling like I’m walking on eggshells”. Things were good for a while and the victim wants to believe that they will stay good, and at the same time they often report a ‘gut instinct’ that things are about to go bad. It might start with little things such as a few hurtful comments, or there might not be anything specific just a feeling of growing tension and unease. Currently the abuser is starting to feel a loss of control, a lack of respect, and/ or a loss of significance.

3) **Explosion/ Incident**

This is what most people think of when they think of domestic violence relationships. This is the time when the victim is most at risk.

4) **Apology/Reconciliation**

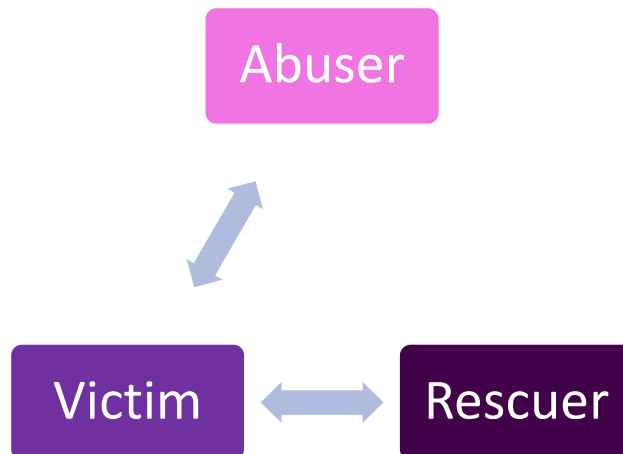
Often, this apology can involve the abuser partially blaming victims. Sometimes the apology can come across as sincere. Sometimes there is no apology at all, and it goes right back into the honeymoon phase. Sometimes the victim might do the apologizing to get back to a safe and calm environment.

In some relationships the cycle stops happening, there are no more apologies and no more calm times, there is only tension and abusive times. This usually happens when an abuser believes that you have no way out.

If the abuser believes that you are trapped, then there is no need for them to apologize and try to make things right with you. Clients that have reported to me that there was no more cycle to the abuse had some of these situations that led them to feel trapped:

- Living away from family and friends (in a foreign country)
- Didn't legally have the right to be in the country without their partner
- Didn't have the money or recourses to leave
- Had religious and cultural reasons to fear separation
- Married very young and felt that they would be on their own forever if they left

Another cycle that often occurs in abusive relationships is the triad of the roles of abuser, victim, and rescuer.



The abuser usually plays the role of abuser as the abuse is occurring and then the victim after the abuse has occurred.

The person who is the victim of the abuse is the victim while the abuse is occurring and then often plays the role of the rescuer after the abuse has occurred.

The abuser does not play the role of rescuer, and the victim does not play the role of abuser.

If you find yourself being treated badly and then feeling that you're taking care of the person who treated you badly this could be another clue that you're in an unhealthy relationship.

Where to go next

If you think that your relationship might be abusive, but you're not sure check out the *"Recognizing Domestic Violence Checklist"*. Also speak to a family counsellor or other trusted professional.

If you think that your relationship might be abusive, but you're not sure check out the *"What is Domestic Violence"* information. Also speak to a family counsellor or other trusted professional.

If you feel that you need to get out quickly because your situation is unsafe check out the *"Safety Plan"*, *"Red Flags"* and the *"Leaving Safely"* information. Also speak to a family counsellor, a trusted professional and if possible, a lawyer. If you need immediate protection, contact the RCMP.