

Case Follow-Up: What to do when violence or abuse escalates or de-escalates, or stasis

Many violent relationships follow a common pattern or cycle. The entire cycle may happen in one day or it may take weeks or months. It is different for every relationship and not all relationships follow the cycle—many report a constant stage of siege with little relief.

This cycle has three parts:

Tension building phase—Tension builds over common domestic issues like money, children or jobs. Verbal abuse begins. The survivor tries to control the situation by pleasing the abuser, giving in or avoiding the abuse. None of these will stop the violence. Eventually, the tension reaches a boiling point and physical abuse begins.

Acute battering episode—When the tension peaks, the physical violence usually begins. It is usually triggered by the presence of an external event or by the abuser's emotional state—but not by the survivor's behavior. This means the start of the battering episode is unpredictable and beyond the victim's control. Note that as mentioned above, it could take some time before physical abuse emerges or it may never—but it may be escalation of a different form of abuse (i.e. economic, psychological).

The honeymoon phase—First, the abuser is ashamed of his behavior. He expresses remorse, tries to minimize the abuse and might even blame it on the partner. He may then exhibit loving, kind behavior followed by apologies, generosity and helpfulness. He will genuinely attempt to convince the partner that the abuse will not happen again. This loving and contrite behavior strengthens the bond between the partners and will probably convince the victim, once again, that leaving the relationship is not necessary.

How is this difficult to handle?

This is difficult to handle because it creates an environment in which survivors hold out hope that things may change or be fine. It is often a reason why they choose to stay in abusive relationships. It also means that



they live in a state of constant fear and worry about what may trigger an escalation of violence which has a long term impact on their mental health.

It can also be difficult for case workers to support a survivor through this cycle because survivors usually seek help at the height of crisis (likely when there has been an extreme escalation of violence) and then as the violence de-escalates and the situation 'stabilizes' in the survivor's view – they may no longer want help. It can be hard not to judge a survivor's situation to stop seeking help when you know that the violence is going to return. The only thing you can do is—if there is a chance to— carry out safety planning so that she can have some kind of plan in place when something happens again, ensure she has your organization's contact information memorized or written down in a safe spot. Communicate to her that she can always come back for help if she changes her mind or something changes of her.

