

Theories of Abuse

There are several theories regarding why men abuse women. Three that will be briefly discussed are:

1. Function of the Relationship
2. Function of the Individual
3. Function of Power and Control

Function of the Relationship

Proponents of this theory believe that abuse is caused by a dysfunctional relationship. The focus is on the belief that abuse is caused by a lack of communication and that couple counselling would be effective intervention. Some of the concerns inherent with this "communication" modality are the lack of analysis of power and control and abuser accountability, the lack of recognition regarding the fear of an abused woman, and the very real risk that couple counselling may increase the danger for a woman. It doesn't explain the events when the woman actively communicated to reduce the violence with no resulting decrease in violence.

Function of the Individual

Proponents of this theory believe that the cause of abuse is an inherent problem with the individual. One belief is that abuse stems from inappropriate ways of handling stress and anger and that abuse is a learned response to stress and anger. Lenore Walker's cycle of violence graphically outlines this belief: the man goes through a slow buildup of tension, explodes at his partner and begs her forgiveness during a honeymoon period. There are many problematic messages within this theory:

1. Honeymoon phase: women report that the absence of violence is not a honeymoon and they feel that this term minimizes the on-going impact of the abuse. They report that the "good times" are shadowed by the fear of impending doom and the stress of obeying all his ever changing rules. Some women suggest that when they are not being subjected to tactics of abuse they are grateful that a day went by with no violence. In this circumstance, the perpetrator has succeeded in total control. As women we would hope that we feel that equality and lack of violence is our birthright and that injustices are met with action. Once a victim is grateful for lack of violence, submission is ensured.

2. The tension building phase: this phase explains that a tension building phase follows the honeymoon phase in which stress and pent up anger rise to such a level that an outburst results. Stress management and anger management techniques are employed as interventions to alleviate the situation. This message is problematic because it does not address the systematic and intentional nature of abuse and the fact that men are very much in control not out of control. Many women report that if the abuser gets angry with them in the grocery store for example that the abuser waits until he gets home to abuse her. Research shows that many men physically abuse women in areas that are not visible ie: the belly, back and legs. Women also report that if someone comes to the door during an altercation that the abuser gains composure, answers the door, appropriately deals with the situation and then returns to the abusive incident. All of these examples describe an abuser who is very much in control of their anger.

Finally the tension building phase also promotes the idea that abuse is biologically based which reduces men's accountability for the behaviour of battering. It ignores the abuser's hatred of women, as well as the desire to dominate them and it does not address the institutional and cultural messages that support and reinforce woman abuse.

Function of Power and Control

The Domestic Abuse Intervention Project in Duluth Minnesota asserts the power and control model. Ellen Pense, the founder of the project, created in collaboration with the abused women, a model based on the [power and control wheel](#) which describes the systematic use of tactics utilized by abusers with the intent to exercise control. She states that men who abuse their partners shift tactics according to what they believe will work in a given situation, the mood they are in, and the response they are looking for from their partner, thus confirming the intentional nature of the abuse. She states further that the abuser employs tactics not only to gain their partner's submission to a specific demand, but also to establish a relationship that he can rely upon in the future. These tactics appear to be random and unexplainable, but in the context of attempting to establish power in a relationship, random acts of violence are fully explainable. In addition, this model purports that the abuse a woman is subjected to is not only personal abuse. She suggests that the personal abuse is supported and perpetrated by institutions. For example: the justice system which does not take the crime of woman abuse seriously, the medical profession that treats it as an individual problem, the government that continues to cut necessary resources for women seeking safety for themselves and their children. These institutions are fuelled by the cultural messages that say women must obey their husbands, every child needs a father, a man is king of his castle.

The London Abused Women's Centre (LAWC) supports the power and control model because

we believe that it most accurately describes the situations which women share with us daily. Our feminist analysis gives rise to an understanding of the interconnection between patriarchal structures and violence against women and children. Further, it is understood that this oppression may be exerted through individual, institutional and/or cultural contexts. We believe further that:

- men are in a social position to abuse power and control and currently not held sufficiently responsible for such abuse;
- in a society dominated by men, women and children are vulnerable to abuse and have few actual or perceived options to ensure their personal safety; and,
- that the interlocking nature of sexism and other forms of oppression (racism, ageism, ableism) add further barriers for women seeking safety for themselves and their children.