

Understanding the Cycle of Abuse: A Comprehensive Worksheet

Explanation

Abuse rarely occurs constantly—it often follows a predictable pattern known as the cycle of abuse. This cycle, consisting of Tension Building, Incident, and Honeymoon phases, can help you identify manipulation, recognize patterns, and make informed decisions about your safety. This 4-page worksheet guides you through visualizing and documenting the cycle, reflecting on its impact, and taking steps to protect your well-being. Use this tool personally, with a therapist, or as part of a support network, especially if you're experiencing or recovering from abuse. If you feel unsafe or in immediate danger, prioritize safety by calling 911, a crisis hotline, or a local shelter before proceeding (see resources at the end). Understanding this cycle empowers you to break free and heal—start here to gain clarity and safety.

Section 1: The Cycle of Abuse Visual Diagram

Creating Your Visual Diagram

Draw or imagine a large circle, dividing it into three segments to represent the cycle of abuse. Label each segment as follows:

- **Tension Building (First Segment):** The phase where tension escalates, often subtly, leading to an abusive incident.
- **Incident (Second, Slightly Larger Segment):** The abusive episode itself, where harm or control peaks.
- **Honeymoon Phase (Third Segment):** The period after the incident, where the abuser may apologize, show affection, or minimize the abuse to maintain control.

Prompt: Sketch this circle in your journal, notebook, or digitally (e.g., using a drawing app). Use colors or symbols to distinguish each phase (e.g., red for tension, black for incident, pink for honeymoon). Reflect on how visualizing this cycle feels and whether it clarifies patterns in your relationship.

Tool: Use a cycle of abuse template (printable from narcED.org/resources or drawn manually) to map the phases. Add notes or arrows to connect behaviors across phases, noting their emotional or physical impact. Review monthly to track changes or escalation.

Section 2: Documenting the Cycle of Abuse

Use the prompts below to describe each phase in your relationship, focusing on specific behaviors, impacts, and tactics. Be as detailed as possible, but prioritize safety—do not

document if it risks harm.

1. Tension Building Phase

This phase involves escalating tension, often marked by subtle or overt control, criticism, or mood swings.

- **Prompt:**List 3-5 behaviors your abuser exhibits as tension builds, including how they affect you and your relationship.
 - **Examples:**
 - **Behavior:**Criticism and put-downs (e.g., “You’re so lazy and useless”).
 - **Impact:** Makes me feel worthless, anxious, and hesitant to speak up, eroding my confidence.
 - **Behavior:**Nitpicking and starting arguments (e.g., “Why didn’t you fold the laundry perfectly?”).
 - **Impact:** Leaves me on edge, walking on eggshells, and fearing their reactions, straining our connection.
 - **Behavior:**Increased control (e.g., monitoring my phone, questioning my whereabouts).
 - **Impact:** Feels invasive, isolates me, and makes me doubt my autonomy, heightening stress.
 - **Behavior:**Jealousy or angry outbursts (e.g., yelling when I talk to a coworker).
 - **Impact:** Triggers fear, reduces my social connections, and makes me feel trapped and unsafe.
 - **Behavior:**Unpredictable mood swings (e.g., shifting from affectionate to hostile without warning).
 - **Impact:** Confuses me, increases hypervigilance, and makes me feel responsible for their moods, draining my energy.

Tool: Use a tension building tracker (e.g., journal or app) to log these behaviors daily or weekly, noting dates, emotions, and impacts. Highlight 2-3 patterns for deeper reflection, setting a goal to review weekly for safety planning.

Write down your tension-building behaviors, including at least one impact for each. Reflect on how these affect your well-being and whether they signal a need for action.

2. Incident Phase

This phase is the peak of abuse, where harm—physical, verbal, emotional, sexual, or financial—occurs, often with threats or intimidation.

- **Prompt:**Describe 2-3 typical incidents, including the type of abuse, whether threats or intimidation were involved, and their impact on you. Prioritize safety—if documenting risks harm, stop and seek help immediately.
 - **Examples:**
 - **Incident:**My partner screamed, “You’re pathetic,” for an hour, calling me names and throwing a plate, threatening, “I’ll make you regret leaving.”

- **Type of Abuse:** Verbal and emotional abuse.
- **Threats/Intimidation:** Yes, the threat to harm me if I leave.
- **Impact:** Left me terrified, humiliated, and isolated, doubting my worth and fearing escalation.
- **Incident:** They grabbed my arm tightly, leaving bruises, and demanded I stay home, saying, “You’re not going anywhere without my permission.”
 - **Type of Abuse:** Physical and controlling abuse.
 - **Threats/Intimidation:** Yes, physical force and control over my movements.
 - **Impact:** Caused physical pain, increased fear, and made me feel trapped and unsafe, worsening my anxiety.

Tool: Use the “Recording Instances of Abuse” worksheet to document incidents securely, noting dates, times, injuries, and witnesses (if safe). Store logs off-site (e.g., with a friend, shelter) or digitally (encrypted, password-protected). Set a goal to record one incident weekly, reflecting on safety needs.

Write down your incidents, including at least one impact for each. Reflect on how these affect your safety and whether they indicate a need for legal or therapeutic support.

3. Honeymoon Phase

This phase follows an incident, where the abuser may apologize, show affection, or minimize the abuse to regain control and keep you trapped.

- **Prompt:** List 3-5 behaviors your abuser exhibits during the honeymoon phase, including how they affect you and your relationship.
 - **Examples:**
 - **Behavior:** Apologies and promises to change (e.g., “I’ll never yell again—I love you so much”).
 - **Impact:** Gives me hope, confuses me, and makes me stay, delaying my decision to leave despite the pattern.
 - **Behavior:** Showering with affection or gifts (e.g., buying flowers, being overly attentive).
 - **Impact:** Feels manipulative, makes me feel obligated, and reinforces my dependency, increasing guilt if I resist.
 - **Behavior:** Minimizing abuse or blaming me (e.g., “It wasn’t that bad—you provoked me”).
 - **Impact:** Leaves me doubting my reality, feeling responsible, and trapped in self-blame, worsening my confusion.
 - **Behavior:** Temporary calmness (e.g., acting loving and peaceful for a few days).
 - **Impact:** Creates false security, delays recognition of the cycle, and makes me hesitant to act, fearing loss of peace.

Tool: Use a honeymoon phase tracker (e.g., journal or app) to log these behaviors, noting dates, emotions, and their manipulative impact. Highlight 2-3 patterns for reflection, setting a goal to review biweekly for safety planning.

Write down your honeymoon phase behaviors, including at least one impact for each. Reflect on how these affect your decision-making and whether they signal manipulation needing action.

Section 4: Control Tactics

Narcissistic or abusive individuals use various tactics to maintain power throughout the cycle. Document these around your visual diagram's outer edge.

- **Prompt:** List 3-5 control tactics your abuser uses, including how they appear in each phase and their impact on you.
 - **Examples:**
 - **Tactic:** Isolation (e.g., discouraging friends, monitoring calls).
 - **Phases:** Tension (criticizing friends), Incident (threatening isolation), Honeymoon (promising more connection).
 - **Impact:** Leaves me lonely, dependent, and fearful, reducing my support and increasing vulnerability.
 - **Tactic:** Emotional Manipulation (e.g., guilt trips, victim-playing).
 - **Phases:** Tension (sulking to control), Incident (blaming me), Honeymoon (apologizing to regain trust).
 - **Impact:** Confuses me, makes me feel responsible, and traps me in guilt, delaying action.
 - **Tactic:** Gaslighting (e.g., "That never happened," "You're too sensitive").
 - **Phases:** Tension (denying criticism), Incident (distorting reality), Honeymoon (minimizing abuse).
 - **Impact:** Erodes my reality, increases self-doubt, and makes me question my sanity, heightening anxiety.
 - **Tactic:** Financial Control (e.g., withholding money, monitoring spending).
 - **Phases:** Tension (criticizing purchases), Incident (denying funds), Honeymoon (promising financial support).
 - **Impact:** Limits my independence, increases fear, and traps me financially, reducing escape options.
 - **Tactic:** Using force or threats (e.g., physical grabs, verbal threats).
 - **Phases:** Tension (angry outbursts), Incident (physical or verbal harm), Honeymoon (promising no more violence).
 - **Impact:** Instills terror, reduces safety, and keeps me compliant, fearing escalation.

Tool: Use a control tactics tracker (e.g., journal or app) to log these behaviors across phases, noting frequency, emotions, and impacts. Highlight 2-3 patterns for safety planning, setting a goal to review monthly.

Write down your control tactics, including at least one impact for each. Reflect on how these maintain the cycle and signal a need for action or support.

Section 5: Reflection Prompts and Action Steps

Reflect on the cycle's impact and take steps to prioritize your safety and well-being.

Reflection Prompts

- **Can you identify this cycle in your relationship?**
 - **Example:** “Yes, I see tension building with criticism, incidents of yelling and control, and honeymoon promises that fade, repeating every few weeks.”
- **Which phase feels worst? Are there phases where you feel confused or manipulated?**
 - **Example:** “The incident phase feels worst—it’s terrifying and harmful. The honeymoon phase confuses me most, making me hope they’ll change, but I feel manipulated by their apologies.”
- **How does understanding this cycle make you feel?**
 - **Example:** “It feels validating and scary—I’m relieved to see the pattern, but anxious about breaking free. It motivates me to seek help and plan safely.”

Tool: Use a reflection journal to answer these weekly, tracking changes in feelings, clarity, and safety needs. Set a goal to review monthly, noting progress or escalation.

Write down your reflections, including at least one specific feeling or example for each prompt. Reflect on how these insights guide your next steps.

Action Steps

Based on your reflections, take proactive steps to address the cycle and protect your well-being.

1. **Create a Safety Plan:** Develop or update a safety plan using the “Creating Your Safety Plan” worksheet, identifying safe places, contacts, and emergency items. Prioritize safety if in danger.
 - **Tool:** Work with a domestic violence advocate (e.g., Sheltersafe.ca, 1-866-863-0511) to tailor your plan, including discreet exit strategies and resources.
2. **Set Boundaries:** Identify 2-3 boundaries to counter cycle phases (e.g., “No yelling in tension,” “No minimization in honeymoon”) and practice assertive communication (e.g., “I need calm discussions—it’s important for my safety”).
 - **Tool:** Use the “Healthy Boundaries” worksheet for scripts, practice, and tracking. Set a goal to establish one boundary this week, logging its impact.
3. **Seek Support:** Reach out to a trusted friend, family member, therapist, or domestic violence hotline to discuss the cycle and gain perspective, especially if abuse escalates or confuses you.
 - **Tool:** Call VictimLink BC (1-800-563-0808), Assaulted Women’s Helpline (Ontario, 1-866-863-0511), or Ending Violence Association of Canada (<https://endingviolence.org/>) for confidential guidance. Join online forums (e.g., Survivors of Narcissistic Abuse, www.survivorsforum.wixsite.com/sona) for peer support.
4. **Document Patterns:** Use the “Recording Instances of Abuse” worksheet to log cycle incidents, including dates, behaviors, and impacts, securely (e.g., off-site, encrypted). This validates your reality and supports legal or therapeutic needs.

- **Tool:** Store logs with a trusted friend, shelter, or safe deposit box, avoiding shared devices. Set a goal to document one incident weekly, reflecting on safety.
5. **Practice Self-Care:** Engage in activities from the “Self-Care for a Happier, Healthier You” or “Rebuilding Strength” worksheets (e.g., grounding, joy-and-comfort activities) to manage stress and rebuild resilience against the cycle’s impact.
- **Tool:** Use a self-care tracker to log activities, noting how they reduce anxiety, boost mood, and support safety. Set a goal to practice one activity daily, reflecting on its effect.

Brainstorm: Write down 3-5 specific actions you’ll take based on your assessment, including timelines (e.g., “Create a safety plan within a week,” “Call a hotline within two weeks”).

Section 6: Important Notes and Additional Considerations

- **Cycle Variability:** The cycle can repeat quickly (e.g., daily) or over months, with varying intensity. Pay attention to escalation or lengthening phases as signs of worsening abuse.
- **Honeymoon Phase Manipulation:** This phase is designed to trap you—recognize false promises or affection as control tactics, not genuine change. Trust actions, not words, over time.
- **You Are Not to Blame:** Abuse is never your fault—help is available, and you deserve safety, respect, and freedom.
- **Tailored Support for Immigrants/Newcomers:** If you’re new to Canada, consult organizations like Immigrant Services Calgary (www.immigrantservicescalgary.ca) or Multicultural Association of Nova Scotia (www.mans.ns.ca) for culturally sensitive resources, addressing isolation, language barriers, or specific threats (e.g., immigration status coercion).

Prompt: Reflect on how these notes resonate with your experience. Are there unique challenges (e.g., immigration, isolation) you face? How might tailored support help?

- **Example:** “As an immigrant, I feel isolated due to language barriers and fear of deportation threats. Understanding these resources feels hopeful—I’ll contact Immigrant Services Calgary for support.”

Tool: Use a tailored support tracker (e.g., journal or app) to log resources, noting accessibility, benefits, and progress. Set a goal to explore one resource monthly, reflecting on its impact.

Canadian Resources and Additional Support

- **National and Provincial Hotlines:**
 - Sheltersafe.ca – Find the nearest women’s shelter or transition house in Canada (<https://www.sheltersafe.ca/>).
 - Assaulted Women’s Helpline (Ontario): 1-866-863-0511, <https://www.awhl.org/>.
 - VictimLink BC: 1-800-563-0808, <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/justice/criminal-justice/victims-of-crime/victimlinkbc>.
 - Ending Violence Association of Canada (EVA BC): <https://endingviolence.org/> – Provincial resources and support.

- **Immigrant/Newcomer Resources:**

- Immigrant Services Calgary: www.immigrantservicescalgary.ca – Support for abuse survivors, including language and legal aid.
- Multicultural Association of Nova Scotia: www.mans.ns.ca – Culturally sensitive resources for newcomers facing abuse.

- **Books and Online Resources:**

- *Why Does He Do That?* by Lundy Bancroft – Insights on abusive cycles and safety planning.
- Out of the Fog (www.outofthefog.website) – Resources on abuse cycles, narcissism, and recovery.

Final Thoughts

Understanding the cycle of abuse empowers you to recognize manipulation, prioritize safety, and break free from harmful patterns. This worksheet helps you visualize, document, and reflect on Tension Building, Incident, and Honeymoon phases, while identifying control tactics and taking action for well-being. You deserve safety, respect, and peace—start by mapping one phase, seeking support, or creating a safety plan today. If you're in danger, act immediately—your journey to healing and freedom begins here.