

# Battered wife syndrome: definition and stages

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BWS recognized as important in providing legal defense to victims and as basis for diagnosis and treatment. However, there has been confusion as to the definition of BWS such as the use of violence committed against the woman as the defining characteristic. The study introduced by Walker (1984) demonstrates cycle of violence and learned helplessness to battered women. (Seligman, 1993) In addition, studies found out that BWS, manifested in a form of depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, physical symptoms, is evident in some abused women putting them at risk of suicide and homicide.

Symptoms attributed to battering may also be a result of stress from a troubled relationship. The Learned Helplessness and Grief Theory (Campbell, 1989) explains the depression in battered women. Moreover, researchers are in disagreement of the factors that affect the level of trauma such as frequency of abuse, educational status and severity of sexual and emotional abuse. The issue on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and learned helplessness in BWS remained unresolved.

Some researchers view battered women in the context of "survivors rather than victims". Furthermore, studies prove that battered women experience stages of abuse where the manifestations of BWS are part of the steps to conflict resolution. Based on these descriptions and findings, it is clear that not all battered women experience BWS. Although widely misunderstood even among legal professionals, "battered woman syndrome" is not a legal defense. It is one approach to explaining battered women's experiences.

Like other "social framework testimony," (Vidmar & Schuller, in press), expert testimony concerning battering and its effects is used in the legal system to help a judge or jury better understand a battered woman's

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experience ( Federal Rules of Evidence 702 ). Battered Women's Syndrome considered a form of Post-Traumatic Stress. Battered Women's Syndrome is a recognized psychological condition used to describe someone who has been the victim of consistent or severe domestic violence. To classify as a battered woman, a woman has to have been through two cycles of abuse.

A Cycle of abuse is abuse that occurs in a repeating pattern. Abuse is identifiable as being cyclical in two ways: it is both generational and episodic. Generational cycles of abuse passed down, by example and exposure, from parents to children. Episodic abuse occurs in a repeating pattern within the context of at least two individuals within a family system. It may involve spousal abuse, child abuse, or even elder abuse. There are generally four stages in the battered women's syndrome. Stage One-Denial Stage one of battered women's syndromes occurs when the battered woman denies to others, and to herself, that there is a problem.

Most battered women will make up excuses for why their partners have an abusive incident. Battered women will generally believe that the abuse will never happen again. Stage Two-Guilt Stage two of battered women's syndrome occurs when a battered woman truly recognizes or acknowledges that there is a problem in her relationship. She recognizes she has been the victim of abuse and that she may be beaten again. During this stage, most battered women will take on the blame or responsibility of any beatings they may receive.

Battered women will begin to question their own characters and try harder to live up their partners " expectations. " Stage Three-Enlightenment Stage three of battered women's syndrome occurs when a battered woman starts

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to understand that no one deserves to be beaten. A battered woman comes to see that the beatings she receives from her partner are not justified. She also recognizes that her partner has a serious problem. However, she stays with her abuser in an attempt to keep the relationship in tact with hopes of future change.

**Stage Four-Responsibility** Stage four of battered women's syndrome occurs when a battered woman recognizes that her abuser has a problem that only he can fix. Battered women in this stage come to understand that nothing they can do or say can help their abusers. Battered women in this stage choose to take the necessary steps to leave their abusers and begin to start new lives. BWS is a psychological reaction that occurs in normal people who are exposed to repeated trauma such as family or domestic violence. It includes three groups of symptoms that assist the mind and body in preparing to defend against threats.

Psychologists call it the "fight or flight" response. The "Fight" Response Mode: In the "fight" mode, the body and mind prepare to deal with danger by becoming hyper vigilant to cues of potential violence, resulting in an exaggerated startle response. The automatic nervous system becomes operational and the individual becomes more focused on the single task of self-defense. This impairs concentration and causes physiological responses usually associated with high anxiety. In serious cases, fearfulness and panic disorders are present and phobic disorders may result.

Irritability and crying are typical symptoms of this stage. The "Flight" Response Mode: The "flight" response mode often alternates with the fight pattern. Most individuals would run away from danger if they could do so

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safely. When physical escape is actually or perceived as impossible, then mental escape occurs. This is the avoidance or emotional numbing stage where denial, minimization, rationalization and disassociation subconsciously used as ways to psychologically escape from the threat or presence of violence.

**Cognitive Ability and Memory Loss:** The third major impact of BWS is to the cognitive and memory areas where the victim begins to have intrusivememoriesof the abuse or may actually develop psychogenic amnesia and not always remember important details or events. The victim has trouble following his or her thoughts in a logical way, distracted by intrusive memories that may be flashbacks to previous battering incidents. The victim disassociates himself or herself when faced with painful events, memories, reoccurring nightmares or other associations not readily apparent to the observer.

American feminist and psychologist Lenore Walker coined the term “Battered woman syndrome”. It is based on two fundamental premises a cycle model of ‘ violence’ and ‘ learned helplessness’. In 1978 to 1981, she interviewed 435 female victims of domestic violence. Walker (1984) concluded that the violence goes in cycles. Each cycle consists of three stages: Tension building stage, when a victim suffers verbal abuse or minor physical violence, like slaps. At this stage, the victim may attempt to pacify the abuser. However, the victim’s passivity may reinforce the abuser’s violent tendencies.

**Acute battering incident** At this stage, both perceived and real danger of being killed or seriously injured is maximal. **Loving contrition** After the  
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abuser discharged his tension by battering the victim, his attitude changes. He may apologize for the incident and promise to change his behavior in the future. The repetition of this cycle over time, linked to the undermining of women's self-belief create a situation of 'learned helplessness' whereby the woman feels "trapped in a deadly situation" in which she may fight back with lethal consequences.

Early formulation of battered woman syndrome referred to the cycle of violence (Walker, 1984), a theory that describes the dynamics of the batterer's behavior. The cycle of violence theory used to explain how battered victims are drawn back into the relationship when the abuser is contrite and attentive following the violence. More recently, battered woman syndrome has been defined as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Walker, 1992), a psychological condition that results from exposure to severe trauma.

Among other things, PTSD can explain why a battered victim may react, because of flashbacks and other intrusive experiences resulting from prior victimization, to a new situation as dangerous, even when it is not. There are a number of criticisms directed at the use of battered woman syndrome, both in a legal context and in clinical environments. BWS as defined by Walker (1984) may be set apart from the majority of recognized disorders in that it describes the behavioral and psychological characteristics of not only the victim, but also the perpetrator.

By working her analysis of the psychology of the perpetrator into her cycle of violence, it is arguable Walker purports to draw both victim and perpetrator into her 'diagnosis' (McMahon 1999). Critics claim that Walker's theory <https://assignbuster.com/battered-wife-syndrome-definition-and-stages/>

(1984) does not explain the killing of abusive partners. If a battered female suffers from learned helplessness, she would, by definition, behave passively (Griffith, 1995) with the suggestion that the model of a battered spouse as a “ survivor” proposed by Gondolf (1988) might be more realistic. Killing abusive partners is not passive behavior, so it contradicts, rather than supports, Walker’s theory.

Nor is the killing of abusing partners consistent with Walker’s theory of “ cyclical violence”. Wilson and Daly (1992) have calculated the sex ratio for spouse killing using data from England and Wales 1977-86. For every 100 men who kill wives 23 women kill husbands. 120 women were killed by male partners in 1992 40% of all female homicides in England and Wales are women killed by partners the figure for men is 6%. Wilson and Daly’s (1994) Canadian data show that 26% of women killed were divorced or separated at the time, Australian data (Wallace 1986) as many as 45% in New South Wales had left or were in the process of leaving.

Accurate official data on women who kill is, as Celia Wells (1994) has pointed out, difficult to access and incomplete. She presents information on 200 women charged during 1984-92. 46 were acquitted 14 on self-defense, a further 98 were found guilty of manslaughter 38 were found guilty of murder and the outcomes were unknown in 55 cases. She notes that more women acquitted or receive a manslaughter verdict than men, but that this does not mean that there are no gendered injustices in the legal process. Cynthia Gillespie (1989) cites a study 29 US cases where BWS was used, only 9 resulted in acquittals.

The language in many of the US cases shows that courts understand BWS as a new and excusable form of female irrationality (Gillespie, 1989). A conviction for murder means two things - a label and a mandatory life sentence. The promoted abolition of the life sentence would only address the second point, and would not necessarily create justice for women convicted of murder, since the tariffs given by judges for many women have been at the higher end of the scale. Studies of women who kill (Browne, 1987) in the US have found that they have experienced repeated and life threatening violence, with a greater frequency of coerced sex.

Almost all the women had also attempted to leave and elicit the support of other agencies in their struggles to end violence. Nothing they have attempted has stopped the violence, and many talk of reaching a point where they believe only one of them can survive. The leading case in Canada is that of RV Lavallee that the Supreme Court heard in 1989. The woman shot her husband in the back during a violent incident, and her plea of self-defense accepted on appeal, BWS evidence presented to the point that she was “ one who could not escape and saw no options for survival”.

(Martha Shaffer, 1990) Judge Wilson made some telling and important points in her judgment that women’s actions judged in the context of her reality. “ It is not for the jury to decide to pass judgment on the fact that the accused stayed in the relationship. Still less is it entitled to conclude that she forfeited her right to self-defense for having done so”. The courts in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom and United States have accepted the extensive and growing body of research showing that battered partners can use force to defend themselves.



In addition, sometimes kill their abusers because of the abusive and sometimes life-threatening situation in which they find themselves, acting in the firm belief that there is no other way than to kill for self-preservation. The courts have recognized that this evidence may support a variety of defenses to a charge of murder or to mitigate the sentence if convicted of lesser offences (Faigman, David L1986) Self-defense when using a reasonable and proportionate degree of violence in response to the abuse might appear the most appropriate defense but, until recently, it almost never succeeded.

Maguigan (1991) argues that self-defense is genders biased both in its nature and in the way trial judges apply it. BWS focuses on women's responses to violence, rather the context of violence in the relationship. It thus diverts attention from the previous behavior of the man, and the danger he represented. The case thus turns on women's personality defects rather than the man's behavior.

The central question becomes why women stay, which she is not on trial for, whilst the more important questions of why men continue to use violence, refuse to let women leave and the failure of agencies to intervene to control violence and protect women are lost. These issues are the ones current international research highlights as central to the contexts in which battered women kill and are killed. The battering " cycle" is by no means universal Walker (1984) herself failed to find it in a third of her interviews - some men for example are never contrite, never apologies and rule the household through a reign of terror.

BWS emphasizes damaged women, rather than women who perceive themselves to be, and in fact be, acting competently, assertively and rationally in the light of alternatives. The legal focus becomes trying to find an 'excuse' rather than a justification linked to a reasonable act. Conclusion: Women's resistance to violence and control is minimized, if not made logically impossible. Research now suggests that in some relationships violence continues precisely because women resist men's controlling behavior (Kelly 1988, Lundgren 1986).

The deaths of men and women are preventable if domestic violence is taken seriously, and that ought to be our primary goal. Creating appropriate defenses for women who kill in desperation is a damage limitation rather than a prevention strategy. It is more than obvious that judges, lawyers and juries need access to the most up to date knowledge about domestic violence in order to counteract the stereotypes and misinformation that has predominated to date. However, are most psychologists and psychiatrists familiar with state of the knowledge?

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