

NAVIGATING CASES WHEN ABUSE IS PRESENT

NORTH CAROLINA DISTRICT COURT JUDGE'S CONFERENCE SUMMER 2025

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WAKE COUNTY DISTRICT COURT JUDGE



WHO AM I?

A portrait of a Black woman with short, curly hair, smiling. She is wearing a black judicial robe and holding a red gavel across her chest. The background is dark with an American flag on the left and a circular seal on the wall behind her.

Who am I? (Professionally)

- Wake County District Court Judge since 2017
 - Lead Child Support Judge
 - Abuse, Neglect, and Dependency Judge
- Assistant Attorney General from 2014-2017
- Assistant District Attorney from 2012-2014
- NCCU School of Law, *cum laude*, 2012
- Wake Forest University, 2009
- Lecturer, Meredith College Paralegal Program, since 2022
- Written numerous articles and publications for attorneys
- Served on numerous boards within the profession, including
- Immediate-Past President of the 10th Judicial District and Wake County Bar Association
- Co-Founder of the Wake County Legal Support Center





Who am I? (Personally)

- Boy Mom of 2—Isaac and Isaiah
- Hobbies
 - Speaking at events
 - Teaching
 - Serving in the community
 - Traveling the world
 - Reading for leisure
 - Working out
 - Sleep + Self Care



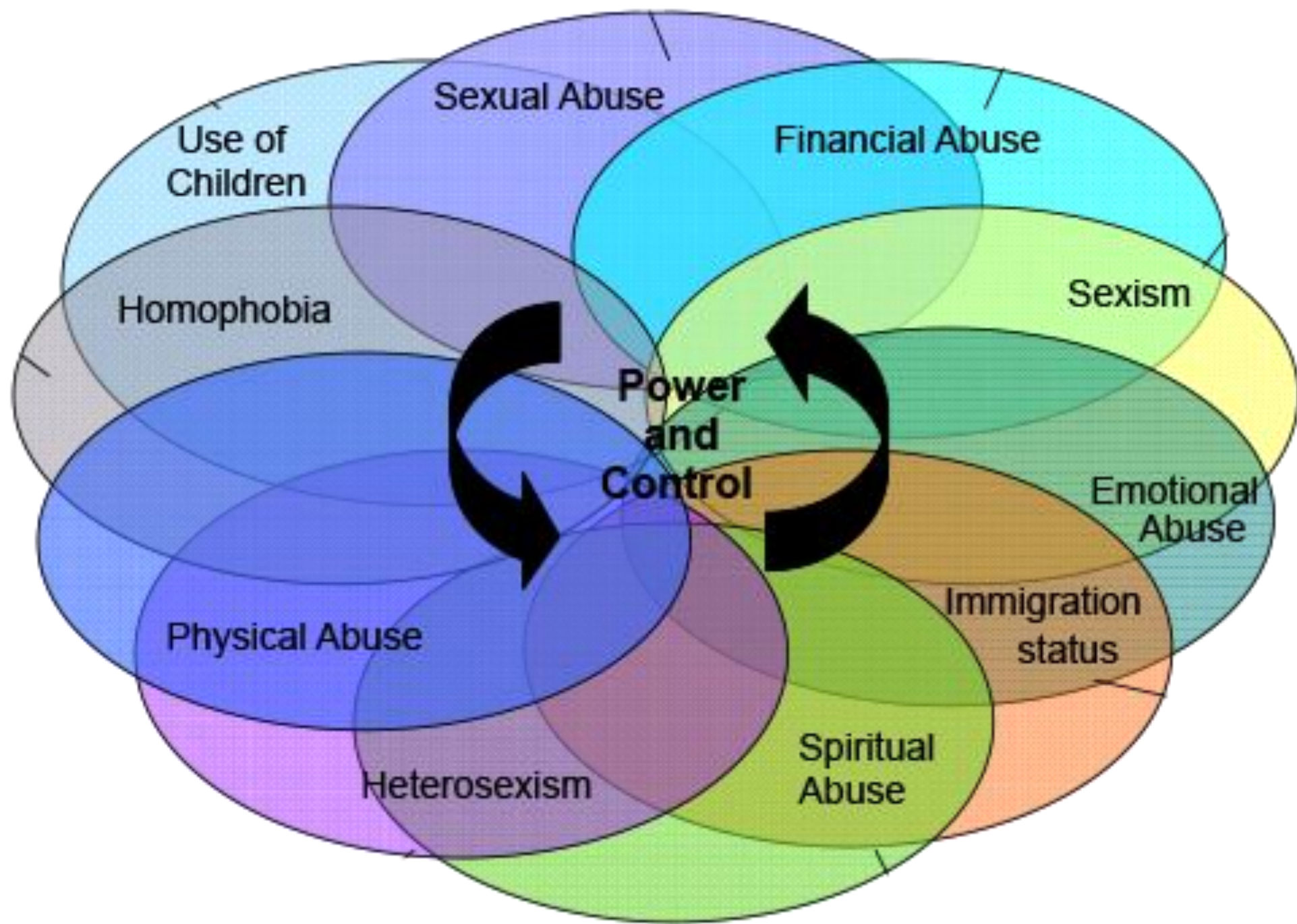
WHAT IS THE MOST COMMON
FORM OF INTIMATE PARTNER ABUSE
THAT YOU SEE IN YOUR CASES?



7 TYPES OF ABUSE (GENERALLY)

1. Physical
2. Emotional/Psychological
3. Sexual
4. Technological
5. Financial
6. Immigration
7. Spiritual
8. Litigious*





PHYSICAL ABUSE

Definition: “Inflicting or attempting to inflict physical injury”

Examples:

1. Hitting, slapping, punching, kicking
2. Burning
3. Strangulation
4. Damaging personal property
5. Refusing medical care and/or controlling medication
6. Coercing partner into substance abuse
7. Use of weapons



SEXUAL ABUSE

Definition: “Coercing or attempting to coerce any sexual contact without consent”

Examples:

1. Marital rape
2. Forced sex after physical beating or when unconscious/not fully awake
3. Forced prostitution
4. Fondling
5. Sodomy
6. Coercing partner to have sex without protection, with others, or sabotaging birth control
7. Criticizing sexual performance and desirability
8. Accusations of infidelity
9. Withholding sex



FINANCIAL OR ECONOMIC ABUSE

Definition: “Making or attempting to make the victim financially dependent”

Examples:

1. Maintaining total control over financial resources
2. Withholding money and/or access to money
3. Harassing the person while on the job
4. Requiring accountability and justification for all money spent
5. Withholding information about bills that are unpaid
6. Not allowing/supporting them working (ie: helping with children)
7. Putting partner on allowance –performance based
8. Intentionally damaging a partner’s credit score



TECHNOLOGICAL ABUSE

Definition: “Use of technology to control and stalk a partner”

common in teens and young people

Examples:

1. Hacking into phones, emails, social media, and other personal accounts
2. Using old iPhones/iPads to view messages
3. Tracking devices in cell phones, cars, etc.
4. Demanding to know partner’s passwords
5. Monitoring interactions via social media
6. Threatening to post information, pictures, videos



IMMIGRANT ABUSE

Definition: “Exploitation of the legal system against immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugee populations”

- Complexity of an unfamiliar legal system
- Conflict between cultural background, new surroundings, and language barriers

Examples:

1. Threatening to have them deported
2. Hiding or destroying legal documents
3. Refusing to file the necessary paperwork for naturalization, child custody, divorce, or other legal proceedings
4. Restricting person from learning English
5. Threatening to hurt partner’s family in their home country



SPIRITUAL ABUSE

Definition: “Manipulation of religious texts to justify abusive behavior”

Examples:

1. Justification of marital rape
2. Control clothing, hair, behavior, relationships, finances, parenting, or family planning
3. Force partner to engage in spiritual practices they don't believe in
4. Instill fear to embarrass, silence, shame, belittle or hurt partner
5. Prevention of practicing own religious beliefs



LITIGATION ABUSE

Definition: “Misuse of the court system to exert power and control over separated/divorced partner”

Examples:

1. Excessive discovery demands
2. Not complying with orders requiring multiple court dates
3. Trying to financially strain partner through attorney fees
4. Filing frivolous motions, show causes, and contempt actions
5. Calling CPS for illegitimate reasons
6. Extensive and exhausting settlement negotiations, only to not comply



LITIGATION ABUSE

Four states have protections for this: Washington, Idaho, Vermont, and Tennessee

2021 HB 795 “North Carolina Abusive Litigation Act”

At the hearing to determine the presence of abusive litigation, evidence of any of the following creates a rebuttable presumption that litigation is being filed, initiated, advanced, or continued for the purpose of harassing, intimidating, maintaining contact with, or retaliating against the opposing party:

- The same or substantially similar issues between the same or substantially similar parties have been litigated within the past five years in the same court or any other court of competent jurisdiction.
- The same or substantially similar issues between the same or substantially similar parties have been raised, pled, or alleged in the past five years and were dismissed on the merits or with prejudice.
- Within the last 10 years, the filing party has been sanctioned for filing, initiating, advancing, or continuing litigation that was found to be frivolous, vexatious, intransigent, or brought in bad faith involving the same opposing party.
- A court of record has previously determined that the filing party engaged in abusive litigation or similar conduct and has been subject to a court order imposing prefiling restrictions.



LITIGATION ABUSE

- Burden of proof: preponderance of the evidence
- Abusive litigation shall be dismissed, denied, stricken, or resolved by other disposition with prejudice
 - Impose all costs of any abusive litigation against the filing party
 - Award the opposing party reasonable attorneys' fees and costs of responding to the abusive litigation, including the cost of seeking the order restricting abusive litigation.
 - Identify the protected person and impose prefiling restrictions upon the restricted person for a period of not less than 48 months nor more than 72 months



emotional

[illegible]

EMOTIONAL / PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE

Definition: “Non-physical behaviors meant to control, isolate, intimidate, harm, or frighten”

Examples:

- Constant criticism and/or monitoring
- Belittling partner’s abilities and competency
- Name-calling, insults, put-downs
- Silent treatment
- Passive aggressiveness
- Gaslighting
- Repeatedly making and breaking promises



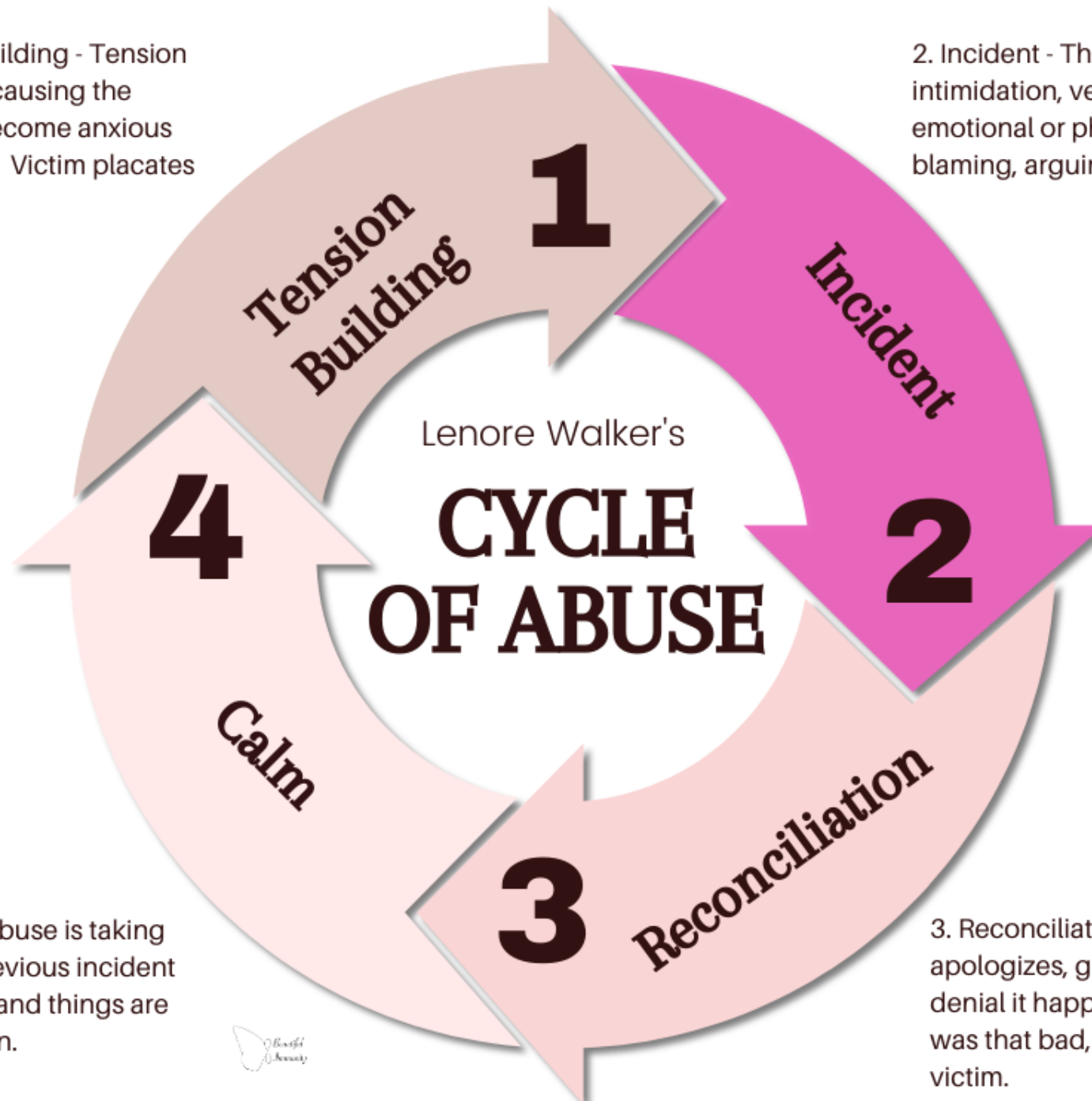
EMOTIONAL / PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE

- Accusations of cheating or other signs of jealousy/possessiveness
- Constant arguing or opposing
- Isolating from family and friends
- Withholding affection and attention
- Refusing to participate in the relationship/seeking counseling
- Using children to affect partner
- Shaming or blaming
- Planning dates or giving gifts to “appease” partner
- Scapegoating and triangulation



1. Tension Building - Tension increases, causing the victim to become anxious and fearful. Victim placates the abuser.

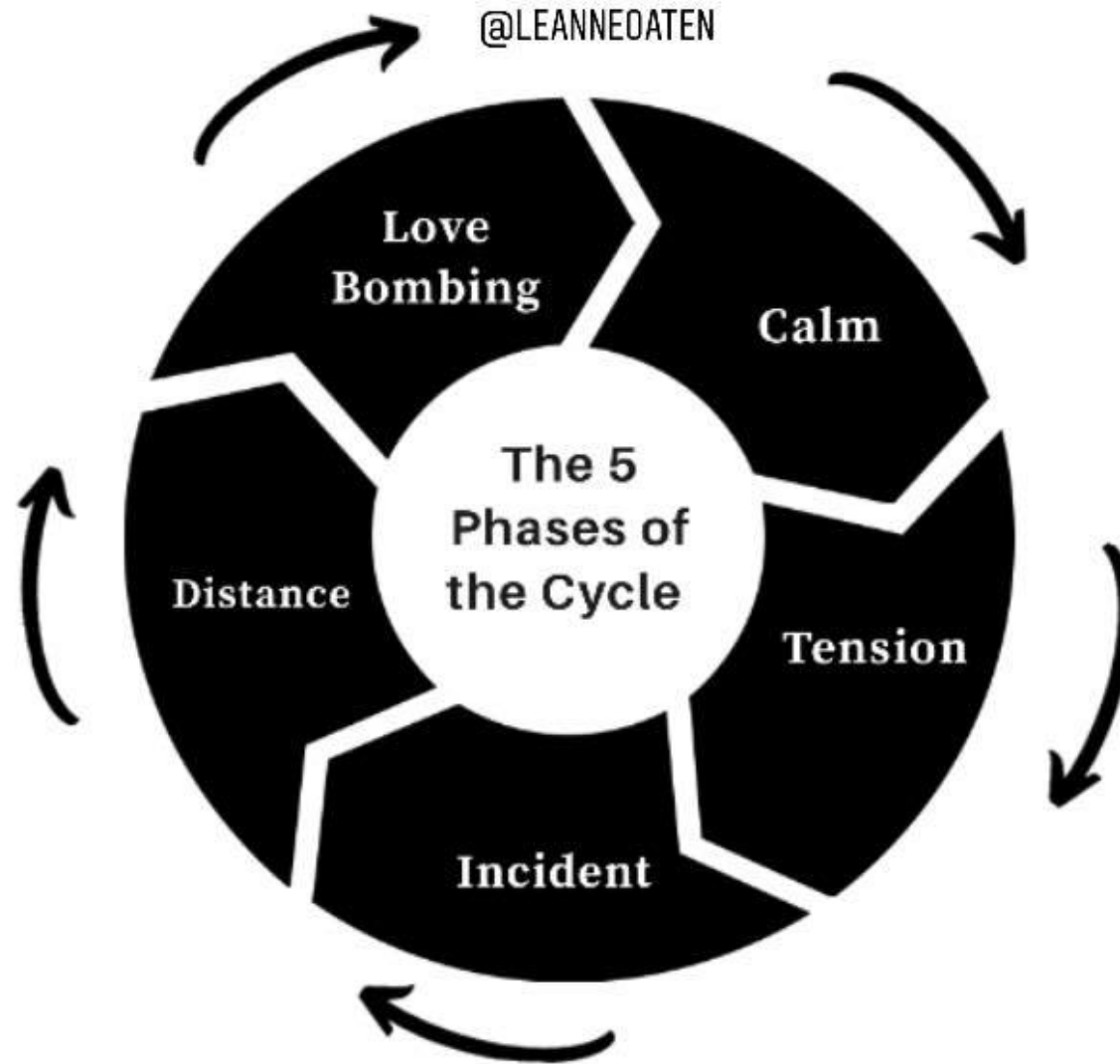
2. Incident - Threats, intimidation, verbal, emotional or physical abuse, blaming, arguing.

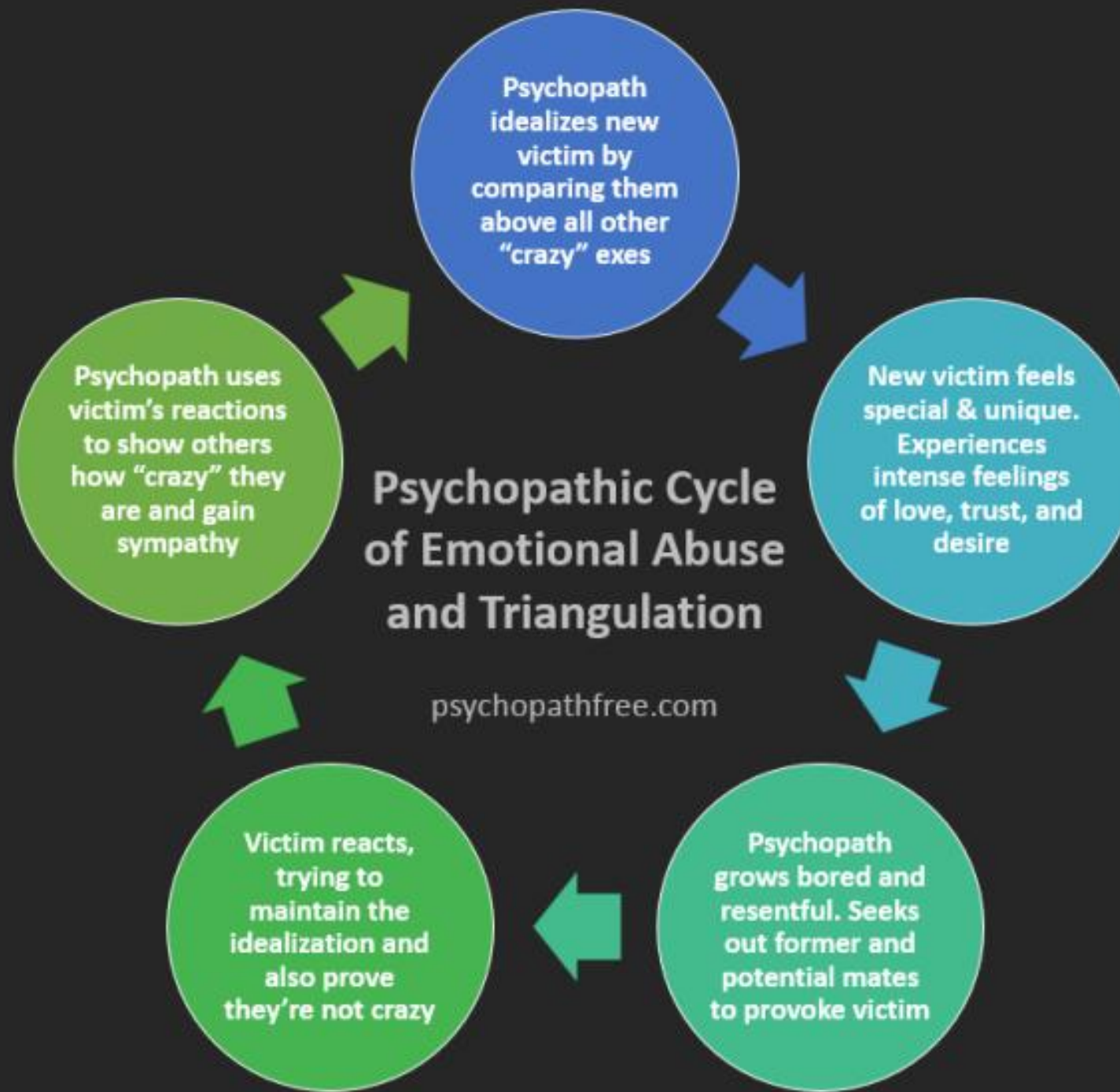


4. Calm - No abuse is taking place. The previous incident is "forgotten" and things are peaceful again.

3. Reconciliation - Abuser apologizes, gives excuses, denial it happened or that it was that bad, or blames victim.

THE 5 PHASES OF THE EMOTIONAL & PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE CYCLE







NPD = Narcissistic Personality Disorder

Sources:

www.paracelsus-recovery.com

Pincus, A. L., Dowgwillo, E. A., & Greenberg, L. S. (2016). Three cases of narcissistic personality disorder through the lens of the DSM-5 alternative model for personality disorders. *Practice Innovations*, 1(3), 164-177. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pri0000025>

Withholding

Someone with NPD might criticize everything about you, destroying your self-esteem and thus making you feel 'lucky' to have them in your life.

Love-bombing



Showering you with an inappropriate amount of compliments and adoration at the beginning of a relationship to eradicate boundaries.

Gaslighting



Occurs when someone tries to gain control over you by making you question your perception of reality.

Campaigns

ate effort to
your reputation.
sist might
size their
nking habits,
er mention
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act with
about how
you were at
ereby
our credibility.

Use

on that intentionally
harm or injures
r person. This can
o physical, mental,
or emotional abuse.

Accusations

Someone with NPD might frequently accuse you of lying,

Disrespecting Boundaries



Someone with NPD might read your messages, follow you, forbid you from doing things, or do something you've asked them not to do. Attempts to reinforce boundaries will be met with hostility, accusations and gaslighting.

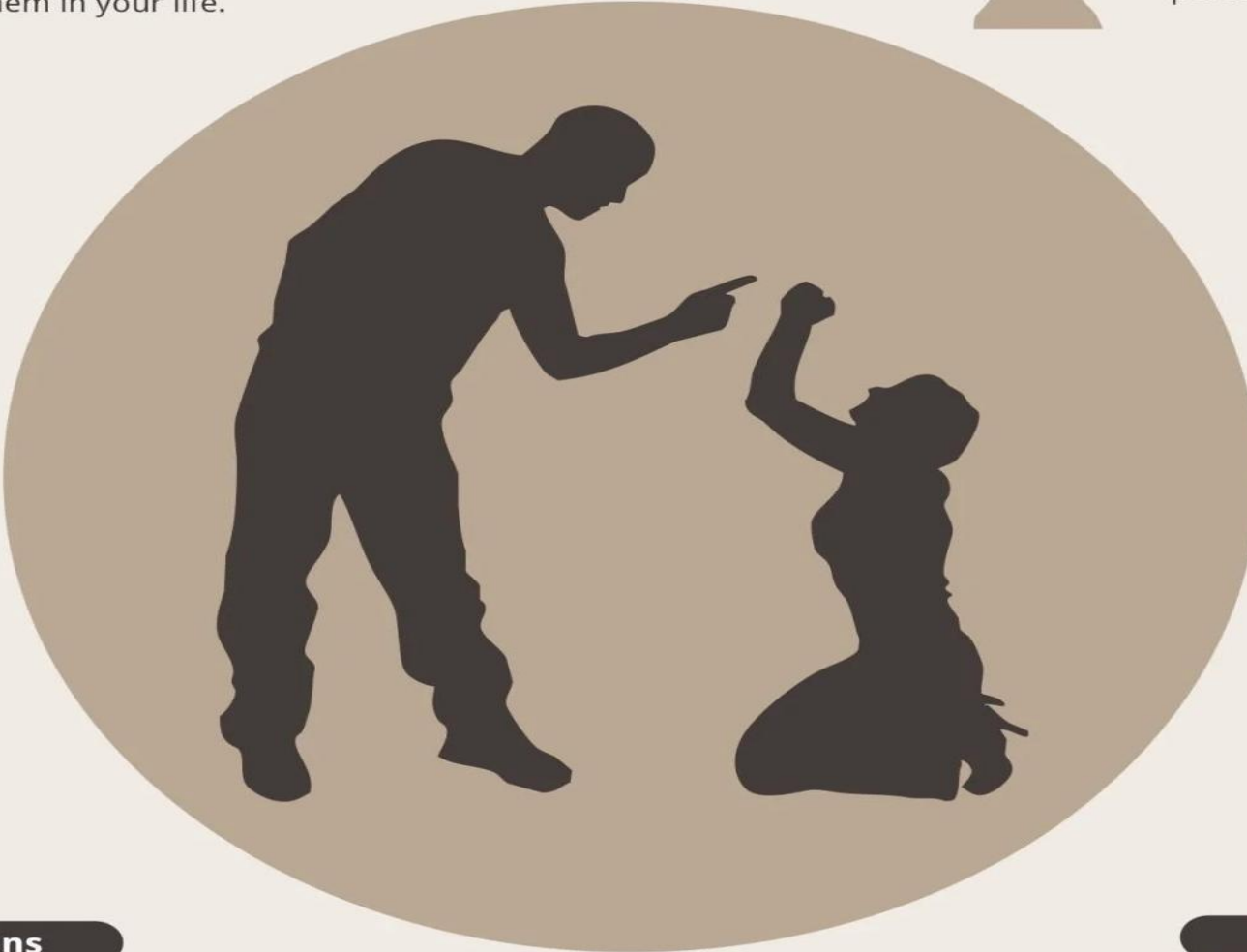
Emotional Blackmail



When you don't do what the person wants, they might try to manipulate you and make you feel guilty, afraid or like a 'bad' person.

Insults

Someone with NPD might criticize everything about



so if they ever mention the abuse, the narcissist can counteract with statements about how intoxicated you were at that time, thereby destroying your credibility.

Abuse

An action that intentionally causes harm or injures another person. This can refer to physical, mental, verbal or emotional abuse.

Accusations

Someone with NPD might frequently accuse you of lying, stealing, cheating or any other negative behavior, such as 'not really loving you.' The tactic here is to manipulate you into a defensive mindset and distract you from their actions.

Sabotage

Someone with NPD might sabotage your career, relationships or other elements of your life so as to keep you under their control.

Emotional Blackmail

When you don't do what the person wants, they might try to manipulate you and make you feel guilty, afraid or like a 'bad' person.

Insults

Someone with NPD might criticize everything about you, destroying your self-esteem and thus making you feel 'lucky' to have them in your life.

NPD = Narcissistic Personality Disorder



Withholding

Someone with NPD might criticize everything about you, destroying your self-esteem and thus making you feel 'lucky' to have them in your life.



Love-bombing

Showering you with an inappropriate amount of compliments and adoration at the beginning of a relationship to eradicate boundaries.



Gaslighting

Occurs when someone tries to gain control by making you doubt your perception of reality.

Smear Campaigns

The deliberate effort to undermine your reputation. e.g. a narcissist might overemphasize their partner's drinking habits, so if they ever mention the abuse, the narcissist can counteract with statements about how intoxicated you were at that time, thereby destroying your credibility.



Abuse

An action that intentionally causes harm or injures another person. This can refer to physical, mental, verbal or emotional abuse.



Accusations

Someone with NPD might



Insults

Someone with NPD might

8 CHARACTERISTICS OF AN {EMOTIONALLY} ABUSIVE PARTNER

1. Emotionally intense and codependent
2. Could be charming, popular, and talented
3. Fluctuates between emotional extremes
4. Might be a former victim of abuse
5. History of abuse and violence in childhood
6. Controlling
7. Inflexible and judgmental
8. May suffer from alcoholism or drug addiction



Signs of Narcissistic Abuse Syndrome

- Feelings of isolation
- Self-doubt and guilt
- Physical symptoms
- Difficulties in making decisions
- Self-destructive behaviors
- Loss of self-identity
- Inability to instill boundaries
- Anxiety and depression
- The "freeze", "flight", "fight", "fawn" response
- Restlessness and feeling "on edge"
- Dissociation
- Trauma bonding
- Trust issues
- Self-harm behaviors
- Self-gaslighting
- Sacrificing personal needs



NARCISSISTIC ABUSE CYCLE



WHAT DO SURVIVORS LOOK LIKE?



WHAT DO SURVIVORS LOOK LIKE?



WHAT CAN WE DO?



WHAT CAN WE DO?

- Be aware of the different forms of abuse
- Be aware that this can affect anyone
 - Yourself, staff, colleagues, etc.
- Don't "rank" the type of abuse on a scale
- Be mindful that many people don't even understand that they are a victim of abuse in other types of cases (ie: custody, child support, etc.)
- Be empathetic to the cycles
- Craft judgments to minimize contact with abuser and survivor
 - Not everyone can coparent with their abuser
- Educate ourselves on treatment methods
- Encourage mental health services for abuser and survivor
- Support survivors in creating boundaries
- Be a Trauma-Informed Courtroom





ACES- INFORMED COURTS



N C C O U R T S . G O V / A C E S



ACES- INFORMED COURTS

N C C O U R T S . G O V / A C E S

Trauma is a harmful or threatening event that can have lasting effects across a person's lifetime. Statistics indicate that one in five (20%) of youth involved youth and at least one third of adults have experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). The Court System's focus on ACEs-informed courts designed this information for Judicial Branch officials and staff to use in their daily interactions with court visitors and participants.



KEYS TO TRAUMA-INFORMED COURTROOM INTERACTIONS

1

Standing court can be scary, especially for children. Those who have experienced trauma may act out. When possible, responding to hostility with patience and calm can help de-escalate situations.

2

Understand the signs and symptoms of trauma and how it impacts decision-making. Ask questions to learn more, and try to reframe thinking as "what happened to you?" rather than "what is wrong with you?"

3

The better those suffering from trauma understand what is happening to them and why, the more likely they are to comply and achieve intended outcomes. Explain court procedures and decisions, where appropriate, ask questions to involve those appearing before you ("what do you think brought you to this point?")

4

Be intentional in how you engage and act in your courtroom. The relationship significantly impacts experiences and participation. There is flexibility to maintain safety and build trust, and you are encouraged to take the initiative to make positive changes (e.g., seat visitors away from stairs, minimize back-to-back seating).

5

One consistent and positive adult in the lives of children significantly buffers the impact of trauma and helps children thrive. Be intentional: help build positive relationships and experiences.

6

Trauma can be treated as another disorder (anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder, ADHDs). Offer trauma assessments in conjunction with treatment to build the treatment plan can be tailored to what the assessment indicates. People are resilient and our goal from trauma is give the opportunity.

KEYS TO BEING A TRAUMA-INFORMED JUDGE

1. Remember, attending court can be scary (especially for children).
2. Understand the signs and symptoms of trauma and how it impacts decision making.
 - Ask questions to learn more, and try to reframe thinking as “What happened to you?” rather than “What is wrong with you?”
3. The better those suffering from trauma understand what is happening to them and why, the more likely they are to comply and achieve intended outcomes.
 - Explain court procedures and decisions; where appropriate, ask questions to involve those appearing before you (“what do you think brought you to this point?”).



KEYS TO BEING A TRAUMA-INFORMED JUDGE

4. Be intentional in how you arrange and run your courtroom. The environment significantly impacts experiences and participation.
 - There is flexibility to maximize safety and build trust, and you are encouraged to take the initiative to make positive changes (e.g., seat victims away from abusers, minimize loud noises).
5. Help build positive relationships and experiences, intentionally.
6. People are resilient and can heal from trauma if given the opportunity.
 - Trauma can be masked as another disorder (conduct disorder, bipolar disorder, ADHD).



HELPFUL COURTROOM PROCEDURES

- Eliminate nonverbal intimidation (like jingling handcuffs or keys).
 - Tell officers not to stand too close.
 - Respect an individual's personal space.
 - Keep noise level low where possible.
- Consider online participation.
 - Many court-users may face travel costs, childcare issues, or even job loss if in-person attendance is required. For example, substantive hearings and testimony may require live attendance, but brief appearances might be achieved online.
 - Online proceedings can also be less intimidating.



HELPFUL COURTROOM PROCEDURES

- Arrange courtroom / waiting area so that families with children sit separately; domestic violence victims are not near their abusers
- Reduce anxiety prior to the hearing by offering clear directions / signage to the courtroom and posting simple courthouse rules.
- Consider whether it is necessary to wear your robe in all contexts — a robe can unintentionally intimidate or trigger trauma. (ie: *ex parte* DV Hearings)
- Have people exit the courtroom at different times
 - Prevents fights/tension in hallways – trust me



BE TRANSPARENT

- Use clear, simple, and non-technical language to let people know what is happening and why.
- Explain the purpose of each hearing and who is in the courtroom.
- Explain what rule / law applies and why the decision is being made.
- Explain procedures (e.g., sidebars, continuations).
- Repeat directions, questions, and orders to ensure comprehension.



ENTERING THE NO JUDGMENT ZONE...



LISTEN & DEESCALATE

- Listen without judgment or without planning what you will say next. If possible, let the person talk and allow sufficient time for them to “be heard.”
- Demonstrate attention by using facial expressions, body posture, and open hand gestures. Pay attention to the speaker’s body language as well.
- Encourage participation by nodding your head, repeating key words.
- Provide regular feedback by reflecting and paraphrasing (e.g., “I can see you are confused” or “It sounds like you’re saying”).
- Acknowledge feelings or points of view respectfully. Maintain eye contact (unless it appears to create agitation).



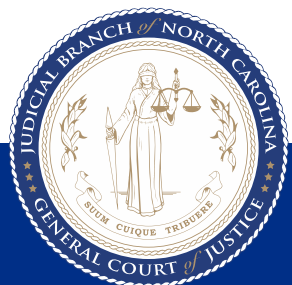
LISTEN & DEESCALATE

- Refrain from looking at the computer or reading the case file while the person is speaking.
- Demonstrate your commitment to fairness, neutrality, trustworthiness, and respect.
- Do not react to hostility with hostility. A person's aggression / anger may be an instinctive survival response and be self-protective.
- Practice emotional labeling by gently naming the person's behavior or feelings in a non-judgmental way (e.g., "I can hear how upset you are," "It sounds like you're feeling sad / mad / etc.").
- Ask questions to clarify the issue. Try to use "what" or "how" questions instead of "why." Keep questions simple and allow responder to answer completely.
- Call a recess to allow the person an opportunity to self-regulate.
- Do not threaten; inform of consequences.



LANGUAGE MATTERS

- “Something bad happened. It’s going to be ok. I can get you someone to talk to who could help. Do you think that might help?”
- “Sometimes bad things happen that should not have happened. You did not cause it. It’s not your fault. You deserve to be safe.”
- “What do you think led you here?” “What happened to you?” “How would you solve this problem?” “Do you have questions?”
- “It’s clear you are trying to change.” “Your commitment really shows.” “Despite what happened in court last time, you have been able to...”
- Use words that are concrete, specific, and delivered with a neutral tone. “I heard that you earned a one-month token in AA. I know you worked hard for that.”



BEING TRAUMA-INFORMED IS A MINDSET

- **INSTEAD OF “HE IS MAKING IT UP.”**
 - THINK: “Trauma is hard to hear and harder to talk about.”
- **INSTEAD OF “HE IS ACTING OUT / SEEKING ATTENTION.”**
 - THINK: “He is communicating his needs in the way that he has been taught.”
- **INSTEAD OF “YOUR DRUG SCREEN IS DIRTY.”**
 - TRY: “Your drug screen shows the presence of drugs.”
- **INSTEAD OF “I’M SENDING YOU FOR AN EVALUATION.”**
 - TRY: “I’d like to refer you to a doctor who can help us better understand how to support you.”
- **INSTEAD OF “YOU’RE GOING TO A COMMITMENT PROGRAM; WE ARE DONE WITH YOU.”**
 - TRY: “Maybe what we’ve been doing isn’t the best way to support you. I don’t want you to give up on recovery. We’re not going to give up on you.”



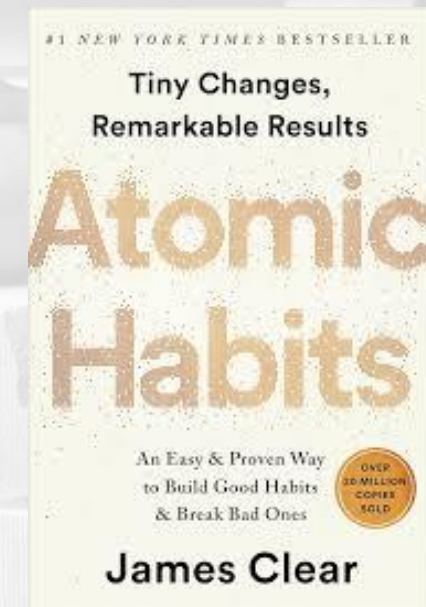
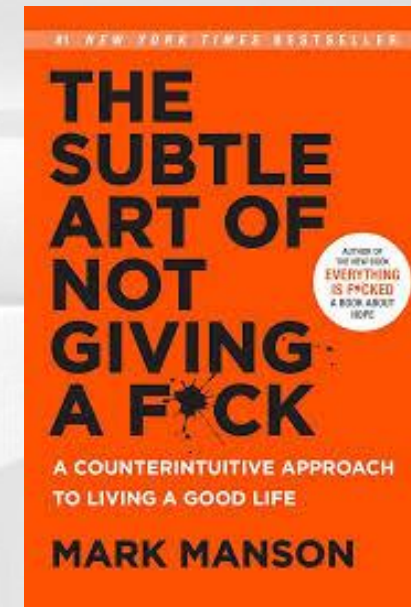
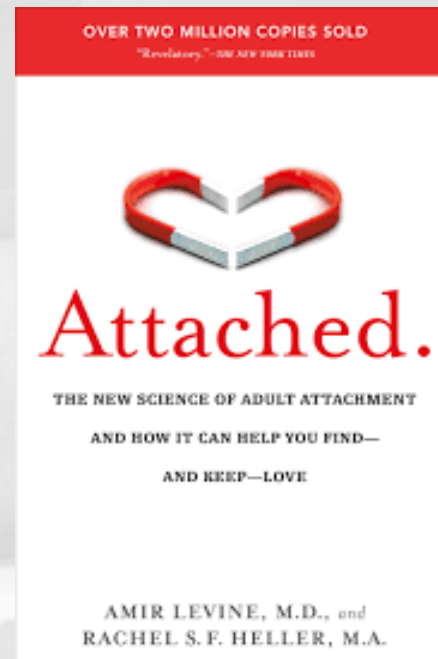
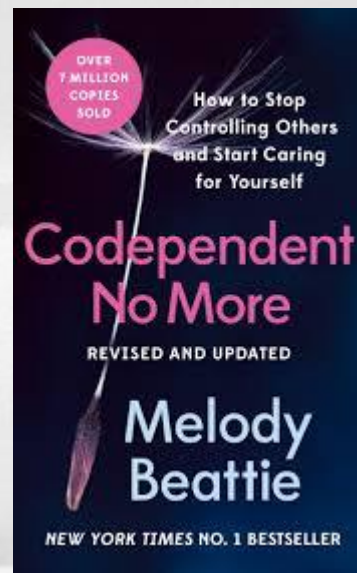
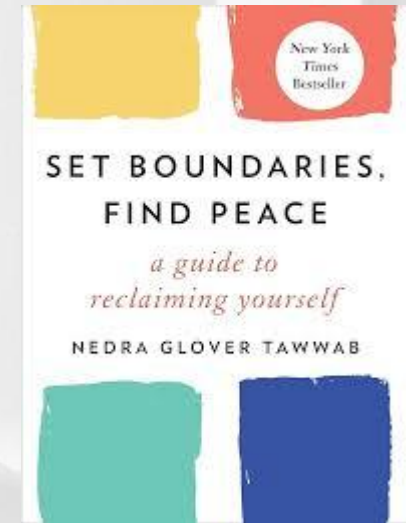
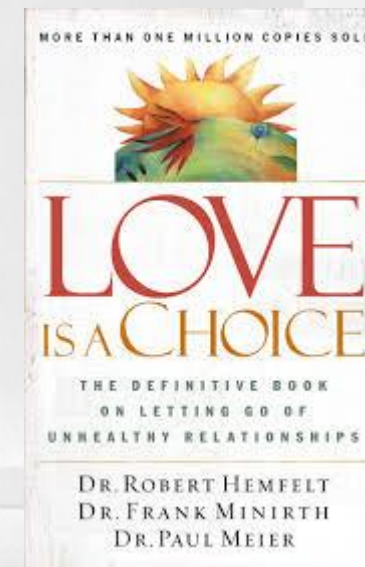
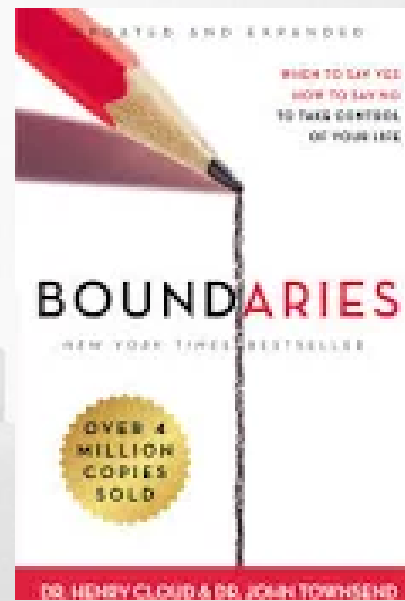
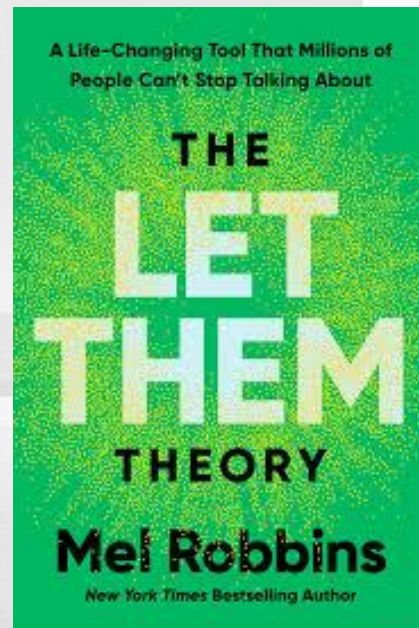
GIVE
YOURSELF
GRACE!



QUESTIONS



BOOKS THAT CHANGED MY LIFE...





THANK YOU

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[Judge.Ashleigh](#)



[JudgeAshleigh](#)



[JudgeAshleighParker](#)

SOURCES / RESOURCES

- [Women Against Abuse](#)
- [Woodbridge VRT](#)
- [Safe Voices](#)
- [Forbes "Domestic Violence in the Courtroom: The Legal System As A Weapon in Domestic Violence Cases"](#)
- [WomensLaw.org](#)
- [Shalva Cares](#)
- [Very Well Mind: Identify and Cope with Emotional Abuse](#)
- [RavenStorms Blog: 5 Steps of the Sociopaths Cycle of Emotional Abuse and Triangulation](#)
- [Lori Booty: Every Person Should Be Taught the Cycle of Abuse](#)
- [Psychology Today Blog: Love in the Age of Narcissism](#)
- [Paracelsus Recovery-What is Narcissistic Abuse?](#)
- [WikiHow: Tell if You are in an Abusive Relationship](#)



