

YOU ARE HOLDING 1.5 CEs IN YOUR HAND!

How it works: Read this CE program and complete the post-test on page 19 and mail it to the Chapter office with your check.

Score 80% or better and NASW will mail you a certificate for 1.5 CEs. It's that easy!

Five Cycles of Emotional Abuse: Codification and Treatment of an Invisible Malignancy

By Sarakay Smullens, MSW, LICSW, BCD

Dear Colleagues,

I presented my codification of five cycles of emotional abuse, the history of how this codification developed, and various successful treatment options at the April 2006 NASW-MA Symposium.

In that workshop, I suggested that, in order to avoid burnout so common in the helping professions, attendees embrace their most unsettling and painful life experiences and will themselves to learn from them. I strongly believe that this determination and focus both promotes and enhances the energy to cope in difficult and traumatic times and, at the same time, enriches personal and professional depth and awareness.

I shared that a protracted divorce process, while my children were very young, led to my understanding of the necessity of dignity in coping with life's unfairnesses, injustices, and betrayals. During this period I began to examine the differences between avoidable and unavoidable pain in a life process, and I realized a universal truth: the state of dignity begins with love. As my life stabilized, I also realized that most parents love their children to the very best of their abilities. However, despite good intentions, pervasive, invisible, and repetitive cycles of emotional abuse perpetuate in an untold number of families. In similar ways, well meaning family members, other than parents, and other important caretaker figures in a child's life also unknowingly may exhibit behaviors, reactions and expectations that have a negative and damaging effect. I have seen clearly in my life and work how relentless cycles of emotional abuse erode the development of dignity as well as the developmental coping skills that accompany its integration and continuation.

The theoretical basis of my codifications, appears in a paper entitled, "Cycles of Emotional Abuse: Treatment of Emotional Abuse in Time-Limited Group Psychotherapy" submitted to the International Journal of Group Psychotherapy for peer review. This journal is the official publication of the American Group Psychotherapy Association. Also, please note that cases illustrated in this course first appeared in my book, "Setting Your Self Free" published by New Horizon Press in 2002, as did the self-administered diagnostic tests.

The Legacy of Emotional Abuse

I have devoted the last 25 years of my professional life to formulating a theoretical base that elucidates the intergenerational perpetuation of cycles of emotional abuse. In 1982, I began a 20 year jour-

nal exploring the preponderance of emotional abuse in my own life and in the life of my clients. These recordings led to an identification and documentation of five cycles of parental and caretaker behaviors that constitute emotional abuse.

The five cycles codified—enmeshment, extreme overprotection and overindulgence, complete neglect, rage, and rejection/abandonment—were first published in *Annals*, the journal of the American Psychotherapy Association, in the Fall of 2002. In differing ways, each cycle entraps its victim in replicative or reactionary relationships with family members, friends, teachers, employers, professional colleagues, and partners. Yet, within the brutality and apparent hopelessness of each cycle of emotional abuse lie the seeds of regeneration and wholeness.

Social workers may believe they have an instinctive grip on the legacy of emotional abuse and its intergenerational victimization and impairment of intellectual and emotional growth. Yet many direct practitioners lack the awareness of the predominance of emotional abuse in so many areas of life; the theoretical structure to link symptom manifestations to specific types of emotional abuse; or the comprehensive spectrum that subsumes these types of emotional abuse.

This is not surprising as emotional abuse is a form of psychological manipulation and acute victimization that gets considerably less attention in professional therapeutic circles than its counterparts, sexual abuse and physical abuse (Hart & Brassard, 1987; Kent, Waller, & Dagnan, 1999; Sidebotham, 2000). Examination of workshop topics and papers presented in myriad professional settings and conferences reveal this serious omission. Further, emotional abuse does not receive the press coverage that can accompany physical and sexual abuse. Simply put: it does not grab the headlines; it is invisible and difficult to document; and those who inflict it or endure it are usually in varying states of denial.

When we question why emotional abuse has been excluded from widespread discussion we find several possible explanations, beginning with the facts that emotional abuse is difficult to define and measure (O'Hagan, 1995), and that it is often of a covert nature, with no visible scars to mark its impact but rather wounds that take, in some cases, decades to surface (Hamarman & Bernet, 2000). Added to these intangibles is the transactional nature of this particular form of abuse; in Glaser's words, "Whereas physical and sexual abuse are in the nature of events, neglect and emotional abuse characterize the relationship between the caregivers and the child" (2004, p.98). Finally, emotional abuse may

elude detection and focus because of its very pervasiveness in so many lives, families, and community and societal institutions (Smullens, 2002a, 2002b). At least one recent study has found emotional abuse to be, in fact, the most prevalent form of abuse (Sidebotham, 2000).

It is generally accepted that emotional abuse is always involved in physical abuse and sexual abuse (Wolfe & McGee, 1994). For example, in one recent study, 90% of physically abused children had experienced emotional abuse as well (Claussen & Crittenden, 1991). This has led some researchers to suggest that the concept of emotional abuse “clarifies and unifies the dynamics that underlie the destructive power of all forms of childhood abuse and neglect” (Hart & Brassard, 1987, p. 161). In this context, it should be noted, however, that multiple types of abuse occurring simultaneously, or “multi-type maltreatment,” may in fact be the rule—and that “pure” forms of maltreatment are atypical (Higgins & McCabe, 2000). My attempts to address emotional abuse on its own terms are not done for the sake of simplifying a complex phenomenon; rather I concur with Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans & Herbison that, “Focusing exclusively on one form of abuse is to risk giving a spurious prominence to the chosen form of victimization (1996, p. 8).”

The reason that this course will focus on emotional abuse as an independent entity is that when it is combined with other abuse types, an implicit hierarchy emerges where emotional abuse stands at the bottom (Melton & Davidson, 1987). For example, guidelines in place in the 1990s in the UK for the Child Protection Register stipulated that the descriptive category of emotional abuse should be used only where it is the main or sole form of abuse. Otherwise a different, more well-established category, such as sexual abuse or physical abuse, should be used (Sidebotham, 2000). This hierarchy obscures several important aspects, beginning with the fact that emotional abuse is a paramount form of victimization in its own right, and can be an accurate predictor of some future psychopathologies in women—such as Irritable Bowel Disease (Ali, 2000) and eating disorders (Kent, Waller, & Dagnan, 1999). A hierarchy which places emotional abuse on the bottom in terms of importance, belies the interdependence of all types of abuse and also overlooks a factor not yet examined in the literature: It has been my clear impression from working with individuals, couples, families and groups that emotionally abusive patterns in relationships will repeat as well as vary in passing generations, morphing into physical abuse, sexual abuse, and back into emotional abuse. The passing of generations alters the delicate balance of an emotionally abusive relationship, especially if the abused partner has opportunities for growth outside of the nuclear and extended family. Specifically, if an abused partner asks or insists that emotional abuse stop, physical and sexual violence can result (Porcerelli, West, Binienda & Cogan, 2006).

The lack of awareness about emotional abuse is, however, slowly beginning to change. In 1997, the Journal of Emotional Abuse began its publication. Community organizations such as Philadelphia’s Sabbath of Domestic Peace address emotional as well as physical and sexual abuse. In their well circulated pamphlet “Making Changes, Bringing Hope” (1999, 2001, 2006) the toll of a constant state of humiliation, social isolation, and ridicule is emphasized. Further, documents such as the American Humane Fact Sheet state

that those “who are constantly ignored, shamed, terrorized, or humiliated suffer at least as much, if not more, than if they are physically assaulted” (2004, p.1).

The seeds for the recent reaction of the therapeutic community to the widespread nature and brutal quality of emotional abuse, were actually sown—albeit incompletely—almost two decades ago. In 1987, the National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse created the following definition of emotional abuse:

Emotional abuse is a pattern of behavior that attacks a child’s emotional development and sense of self-worth. Emotional abuse includes excessive, aggressive or unreasonable demands that place expectations on a child beyond his or her capacity. Constant criticizing, belittling, insulting, rejecting and teasing are some of the forms these verbal attacks can take. Emotional abuse also includes failure to provide the psychological nurturing necessary for a child’s psychological growth and development—providing no love, support or guidance (Cohn, 1987, p. 12).

This definition represents one of several attempts to clarify the phenomenon of emotional abuse by grouping together different behaviors on the part of the caregiver; these have been more specifically codified in the work of Garbarino, Guttman & Seeley, 1986; and Hamarman & Bernet, 2000. But this is only one half of the story: the action of neglect, for example, does not end when the neglected child grows up and leaves the household of his or her family of origin. As clinicians know, sadness may develop and continue to be exacerbated as a previously abused individual experiences fear in the workplace, is unable to reach out to others either in a romantic or platonic context, or chooses living conditions that further isolate himself or herself from the social mainstream. It is vital, therefore, to consider the ongoing realities of individuals who have been emotionally abused when attempting to create useful categories within the concept of emotional abuse.

By presenting my own codifications which follow, I hope to provide subdivisions within the field of study that can not only enhance understanding of damaging caregiver behaviors, but also can lead to clear identification of developmental problems, their ramifications, and effective treatment plans and preventive opportunities.

Gaining a Foothold

When clients honestly attempt to assess their present and are either afraid to admit to themselves what they want out of life, or believe that they are good enough to have, or do know what they want, but cannot find the strength and courage to pursue it, emotional abuse is very often the cause.

Those who experience this abuse, unless insight is developed and pain is understood, become either victim or tyrant (or their combination.) Without realizing the harm done, they act out their buried conflicts on all personal, communal, professional and societal fronts. As generations pass, further, ever expanding cycles of emotional abuse, that threaten the health of all concerned, are formed.

In emotionally abusive households one often finds a “he said-she said” situation, where the abuser denies and the abused affirms what is actually going on. The abused are often children who have neither words nor perspective to communicate their pain. Over

time abused children often use enormous energy to block out what happened to them. They also may look back, struggling to make sense of their feelings of inferiority and worthlessness in an attempt to discover what feelings, attitudes and beliefs were encouraged or discredited in their youth. Try as they may they have great difficulty doing so. Above all, they go to great lengths so that others do not guess how badly they hurt and how crippled they feel. They believe that if they look and act as if all is well, their disguise will prevent further shame and humiliation. This relentless determination builds mounting walls of isolation and further erodes self esteem and confidence, and thus, a dangerous, self-defeating pattern continues.

In the victimization of cycles of emotional abuse, infection and subsequent scarring is on the inside. For instance, external appearances alone do not publicly identify a highly educated father who bullies his wife and children; a wife who constantly manipulates her husband, with no regard for his well being; a charming and intelligent mother who does not understand the importance, the necessity, of allowing her child/children an opportunity to develop autonomy; or a charismatic employer, board chair, or political leader who “rules” through fear and intimidation.

Emotional abuse robs one of an ability to dream, and to hope and plan that dreams can be realized. Further, and equally important, emotional abuse robs those who endure it of an ability to know how to find other dreams when some are not within one’s grasp, are lost, or, as important, prove to be dreams that will become nightmares.

As a result of this malignant state of confusion, lack of confidence and denial, presenting problems brought to the clinician are not described by the client as emotional abuse. Behaviors include food issues such as anorexia and bulimia; excessive use of alcohol, narcotics, or both; hypochondria; depression; suicidal ideation; sexual acting out; engaging in risky physical stunts or exploits; and ignoring or undercutting relationships with promise, gravitating instead to highly destructive ones. These behaviors may manifest themselves as an immediate cry for help, may come to light periodically, or may present as a lingering and low-level chronic feeling of unhappiness.

The first step toward treatment is to begin the slow process of client identification of one or more of the five cycles of parental or caregiver behavior that constitutes emotional abuse (rage, enmeshment, extreme overprotection and overindulgence, abandonment/rejection, and complete neglect). Through a close evaluation of what individual clients present, some surprising connections about emotional abuse can be revealed. When the client begins to understand that his or her behavior is self-defeating, there is usually a realization in contrast to something. That something is usually a hope, a dream, a vision, one that, despite deep suffering, was never entirely lost.

For those who experienced emotional abuse, their voice of truth, the essence of who they are, as opposed to what their parents or caretakers willed them to be, or who they became as a result of terror, is buried within. In an effort to free it, I invite clients to take the following Emotional Abuse Inventory and discuss it with me; I have found this tool to be exceedingly helpful in recovering the

hope, the dream, the vision.

The Emotional Abuse Inventory

Clients should find a quiet, private place to take this diagnostic test. *Figure 1.* For each statement on the Emotional Abuse Inventory, the behaviors described should be evaluated as to whether the client is prone to them some of the time, all of the time, or none of the time. Each one is an “I” statement, and clients are invited to pay close attention with what resonates for them, to above all, be honest with themselves.

Oftentimes, the answer to a particular question in all the self-tests that follow will present itself intellectually. But just as frequently the answer can be intuited from the client’s anxiety level. They should be encouraged to notice their physical reactions: Do they feel like crying? Do they feel sad? Do they feel bitter? Do they feel angry? When they look in the mirror, what do their eyes tell them? What does their facial expression tell them?

To score this test, clients give themselves 2 points for every time they answered “frequently,” 1 point for every time they answered “sometimes,” and 0 points for every time they answered “never.” If their score is over 12 points, chances are very strong that during their childhood they have experienced emotional abuse.

The result of a higher-scoring Emotional Abuse Inventory can often be a springboard into the most serious discussion of emotional abuse a client has to that point been capable of. They may experience extreme discomfort and anxiety at this point, feeling that emotional abuse is an ocean that surrounds them, a strong current against which they could never learn to swim.

What I have found useful at this juncture is to begin to isolate the relationships in which the emotional abuse was likely to have occurred: whether via their parents, siblings, friendships, love relationships, work environments or community participation. Such an undertaking has to be qualified, given the nature of family dynamics it is highly likely that emotional abuse has come from more than one source; in addition, as one of the goals of my work is to help clients see the ramifications and extent of the way emotional abuse has played out in their own lives, such pinpointing of the exact sources of their personal legacy of emotional abuse may encourage them to isolate their pain in the locus of another individual.

Nevertheless, there is much to be gained from the traditional psychotherapeutic practice and from taking an emotional abuse history. Because of this I provide the following self-tests to my clients. Some may take all of them; others may gravitate toward taking only a few. I have found that taking these tests early on in our work together brings up much useful material, but this is not the only way to use them. Often clients may take the same diagnostic tool, such as the Emotional Abuse Inventory, a few years after taking it for the first time. In this way they see that with their hard work their score has dropped considerably!

In the case of the sibling test, which follows, a client with a sibling or siblings should take the diagnostic for each sibling. In the case of the friendship self-test, which also follows, it will be useful for a client to take the diagnostic test when a specific friendship has been identified as a possible theater for emotional abuse. Perhaps

Figure 1.

The Emotional Abuse Inventory			
	Frequently	Sometimes	Never
I am self-centered, even when I don't want to be.	0	0	0
I never think of myself.	0	0	0
I put myself in harm's way.	0	0	0
I ask others to speak up for me.	0	0	0
I am unavailable to my other family members.	0	0	0
I can treat my friends carelessly.	0	0	0
I let my friends take advantage of me constantly.	0	0	0
I treat money like tap water.	0	0	0
I participate in meaningless activities.	0	0	0
I sulk, have quiet temper tantrums or moodiness.	0	0	0
I have irrational outbursts and attack others.	0	0	0
I make self-defeating choices in love, friendship and work.	0	0	0
I am unable to say NO to the wrong opportunities.	0	0	0
I am unable to say YES to the right opportunities.	0	0	0
When I am successful, I feel guilty.	0	0	0
Minor setbacks can look like catastrophes to me.	0	0	0
I can't make decisions.	0	0	0
After making a decision, I always believe I made a mistake.	0	0	0
I try to control as much as I can in my present environment.	0	0	0
I lash out at my partner instead of communicating maturely.	0	0	0
I am somewhat elusive when it comes to intimate relationships.	0	0	0
The idea of commitment terrifies me.	0	0	0
I look for romantic partners who are unavailable.	0	0	0
I run like hell when a good opportunity in friendship, love or work comes my way.	0	0	0
I make poor investment choices.	0	0	0
I rebel against authority figures.	0	0	0
I am sexually promiscuous.	0	0	0
My partner has a tendency to be cruel.	0	0	0
I think yelling is normal.	0	0	0

Figure 2.

Self-Test for Emotional Abuse: Siblings			
	Frequently	Sometimes	Never
My sibling teases or makes fun of me.	0	0	0
I am happy when my sibling fails.	0	0	0
I idolize my sibling.	0	0	0
My sibling and I don't see eye-to-eye.	0	0	0
I hide who I really am from my sibling.	0	0	0
I know which of us my mother likes better.	0	0	0
I know which of us my father like better.	0	0	0
I know which of us fits my parents' model of the ideal child.	0	0	0
When I criticize my sibling and he or she cannot respond, I feel like I have won a point.	0	0	0
I'm afraid to confide in my sibling.	0	0	0
What I say to my sibling makes its way to my parents.	0	0	0
Discussions with my siblings turn into arguments.	0	0	0

the client will find that similar repetitive problems exist between a friend (or lover) that exist with a sibling or with a parent. This insight can lead to new awarenesses and new options about future changes in attitude, behavior, and relationships.

In all of the tests that follow, the protocol is the same although the “breakpoint” score is different; I have noted this at the bottom underneath the test.

Self-Test for Emotional Abuse: Siblings

Figure 2. The sibling relationship represents in many ways our first sharing experience with someone roughly in the same peer group. Siblings usually act toward one another in ways similar to how their parents treat them and each other. Envy, jealousy and rivalry between siblings are inevitable. However, when there isn’t enough mature love in a family, children may be forced to compete with one another, or act out against each other, in ways that cannot be reconciled. Children who are surrounded by constant sources of conflict or by family members who demean them, who play favorites or who cause friction in their lives in other ways, are by definition emotionally abused and regularly develop damaged relationships with their brothers and sisters. Their “unfinished emotional business” is regularly acted out in all areas of their lives, with everyone they meet who may feel important to their well being or whom they fear may threaten it. Their “judgment lens,” their ability to see clearly and assess potential positive and negative relationships, is severely skewed. Of course this observation is true of all damaged relationships in formative years, not only those with siblings.

To score this test, clients give themselves 2 points for every time they answered “frequently,” 1 point for every time they answered “sometimes,” and 0 points for every time they answered “never.” If their score is over 6 points, chances are very strong that during their childhood they have experienced emotional abuse.

Self-Test for Emotional Abuse: Friendships

Figure 3. There is no joy in life greater to us than the people we love, whether those individuals are from our families of origin or from the families that we create for ourselves. Through our relationships with friends, we can create extended families, not necessarily as substitutes for our families of origin, but simply to augment the living experience. These families we choose will share our times of happiness, give us strength in times of trouble, and create memories that forever enrich and inspire our lives.

Friendships, however, can bring pain as well as pleasure. Those friends who have proven to be unreliable, possessive, controlling or even abusive probably were treated this way by their parents or caretakers. Such individuals then later repeat the only pattern of behavior they know with others who are significant in their lives.

To score this test, clients give themselves 2 points for every time they answered “frequently,” 1 point for every time they answered “sometimes,” and 0 points for every time they answered “never.” If their score is over 5 points, chances are very strong that during their childhood they have experienced emotional abuse. Chances are of course very strong as well that their “friend” (with friends like these, who needs enemies!) experienced emotional abuse as well, but I have found it more useful to stay with the client’s expe-

rience. They may find that as they heal, this friend’s behavior starts to look different even if it itself hasn’t changed, of course, they could also find themselves no longer friends with this individual!

Self-Tests for Emotional Abuse: Love Relationships

Figure 4. In an adult client’s life, the practitioner finds that love relationships are where the legacy of emotional abuse is expressed most profoundly. Love relationships: their intensity or dullness, their aching longevity or speed with which they flame out, their aptness or ill-suited quality, as they are such a complex phenomenon, I have found that three multiple self-tests are useful, and indeed called for, instead of one overall or introductory self-test.

I give this first test to establish some ground in the messages clients were given during formative years about the reason for love or the work of love relationships. Clients respond not so much from their own belief but from their formative experience, did they hear any of the following impairing messages spoken directly or implied? I call this first self-test the “Emotional Impairment Quiz.”

To score this test, clients give themselves 2 points for every time they answered “frequently,” 1 point for every time they answered “sometimes,” and 0 points for every time they answered “never.” If their score is over 4 points, chances are very strong that during their childhood they have experienced emotional abuse.

Figure 5. This second test I call the “Teenage Sexuality Patterns Quiz.” It may come as little surprise that our first genuine, if fledgling attempts at love relationships after we have reached puberty are a treasure trove of information about how clients were educated, or mis-educated in their childhoods. Many messages that may have remained dormant because not overtly challenged come to the foreground at this time and can cause either explicit strife or internalized guilt and repression, or both. The teenage years are often a period of time more easily remembered by clients than say their elementary school years. Therefore this self-test can be very helpful in uncovering materials for the therapy session.

To score this test, clients give themselves 2 points for every time they answered “frequently,” 1 point for every time they answered “sometimes,” and 0 points for every time they answered “never.” If their score is over 7 points, chances are very strong that during their childhood they have experienced emotional abuse.

Figure 6. The final self-test I call the “Relationship Voice of Truth Quiz.” It helps clients evaluate their current relationship to determine the extent to which emotional abuse may have impacted either their choice of partner or the way in which they interact with their partner.

In contrast to the previous self-tests, clients score themselves “positively” on the Relationship Voice of Truth Quiz. That is, they give themselves 2 points for every time they answered “frequently,” 1 point for every time they answered “sometimes,” and 0 points for every time they answered “never.” If their score is over 11 points, they should be congratulated—they are well on their way to developing a lasting relationship!

Self-Test for Emotional Abuse: *The Workplace*

Figure 7. With the subtle threads of power and innuendo, the dynamic in some workplaces may closely mirror cycles of emotional abuse experienced in childhood. The stakes are almost as high, without their livelihood our clients would not be able to care for themselves or their families. Many stay in nonproductive and emotionally abusive work situations long after they have outlived any possible fulfillment or productivity. Why do clients, why do friends, why do we do this to ourselves? To a large extent, beyond earning the necessities, the answer lies in the continuity of the emotional abuse cycle or cycles that are familiar to us from childhood days.

To score this test, clients give themselves 2 points for every time they answered “frequently,” 1 point for every time they answered “sometimes,” and 0 points for every time they answered “never.” If their score is over 8 points, chances are very strong that during their childhood they have experienced emotional abuse.

Figure 3.

Self-Test for Emotional Abuse: Friendships			
	Frequently	Sometimes	Never
This person doesn't let me talk about my problems.	0	0	0
When I am talking, this person interrupts with a story about herself or himself.	0	0	0
This person lies to me.	0	0	0
This person arrives late for a meeting or cancels our dates at the last minute.	0	0	0
This person criticizes me to others.	0	0	0
This person betrays my secrets.	0	0	0
This person does not accept what I say about how I am feeling.	0	0	0
This person make cutting remarks about my appearance, feelings, etc.	0	0	0
This person holds grudges for longer than a day.	0	0	0
This person generalizes about my experiences or seems to remember only the bad parts.	0	0	0
I feel that true self-expression on my part will cause this friendship to explode.	0	0	0

Figure 4.

Self-Test for Emotional Abuse: Love Relationships			
	Frequently	Sometimes	Never
I'll make your life effortless, painless and perfect— if you don't leave me.	0	0	0
No one can keep you as safe as I can.	0	0	0
No one can love you as much as I can.	0	0	0
No one will do more for you than I will.	0	0	0
Your primary job in life is to make me happy and give me something to love for.	0	0	0
If you ever care for anyone more than you care for me, my life will be meaningless.	0	0	0
I own you and can treat you any way I please.	0	0	0
You owe me everything.	0	0	0

The Mechanism of Abuse

Once a client has taken the diagnostic tests presented above, one or possibly several discussions about emotional abuse have now likely taken place. The transition from an emotional abuse history to a more realistic understanding and awareness of behaviors in the present that result from cycles of emotional abuse entrenched in the first floor of one's emotional home develop at different rates depending on the client. I have found it very important for a practitioner to have this grasp of the theoretical underpinnings of continued patterns of dysfunctional behaviors. For such clients, defined reality, will help to illuminate reasons for the painful or absent relationships that usually mark the lives of those who are abused, emotionally and otherwise.

Psychology has long recognized an important fact about the nature of trauma, the compulsion of the human psyche to repeat traumatic events. However, it was not until 1920 that Sigmund Freud coined a term for the phenomenon: “repetition-compulsion.” Before that time, Freud had only posited a “pleasure-principle,” emphasizing

the human priority of the pursuit of gratification. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, however, Freud paired Thanatos, the death-drive, with Eros, instincts of self-preservation and sexual gratification. This death-drive allowed Freud to illuminate the human tendency toward destruction, including self-destruction: “The compulsion to repeat also recalls from the past experiences which include no possibility of pleasure, and which can never, even long ago, have brought satisfaction even to instinctual impulses which have since been repressed” (1920/1974, p. 20).

This dynamic is especially vivid in interpersonal relationships. Psychotherapists have seen repeatedly that no sooner does a client who is caught in a pattern of abuse finally end one relationship with a particularly hurtful person than she or he chooses another “wolf,” even if the new partner does come in sheep's clothing. While Freud

believed that individuals manifesting a repetition-compulsion were doing so because they sought personal obliteration, later researchers, while keeping the term repetition-compulsion in use, have begun to question whether such behavior is merely a habitual expression of one's reality, i.e. something one does because it is all one knows, or whether there is, to amend the quote above slightly, some possibility of pleasure. This "pleasure" may come in the form of healing old wounds, as in the case of individual or group therapy participants who break through stagnant patterns in the presence of the therapist and/or other group members (Smullens, 2002c.)

Figure 5.

Teenage Sexuality Patterns Quiz			
	Frequently	Sometimes	Never
I have had sex with partners I did not love or I did not even know well.	0	0	0
I pursued people very different from myself.	0	0	0
I had to make choices between my family and my dating partners.	0	0	0
My parent or parents disapproved of the people I chose to date.	0	0	0
My parents never spoke positively about those I dated or my love relationships.	0	0	0
My parents never wanted to meet anyone I dated.	0	0	0
My parents expected my dates or love interests to always be part of their world. They never expected us to have time without them.	0	0	0
I had a series of short relationships, lasting perhaps three months or less.	0	0	0
I stayed in a long-term relationship, well after it was clear that it wasn't working for me.	0	0	0
I remained dateless through high school and into college.	0	0	0
I stayed in bad relationships to rebel against my parents.	0	0	0
I left one or more people I cared about to please my parents.	0	0	0
I often think of someone I love who I left, because my parent(s) disapproved of him or her.	0	0	0

Weiss's control-mastery theory owes much in its development to the theory of repetition-compulsion. Weiss, however, stipulates three very important differences in his approach from that of Freud, one of which is of particular concern to the therapeutic perspective of this course. Characterizing Freud's theory, Weiss says:

The unconscious repetitions in the transference of childhood experiences are regulated beyond the patient's control by the pleasure principle and the repetition compulsion. These repetitions are intended unconsciously either to provide gratifications in relation to the therapist, or, by serving as transference resistances, to protect the unconscious gratifications that the patient obtains in his psychopathology (1993, p. 18).

According to Weiss, the way in which control mastery theory differs is:

The various repetitions in the transference of the patient's childhood experiences are unconsciously purposeful. They are brought about by the patient for various purposes, one of which is to test his pathogenic beliefs (1993, p. 18).

The question centers on whether this testing is purposeful, or whether the unconscious has a plan as Weiss believes, or whether as in Wachtel's work on "cyclical dynamics" the patterns of reinforcement in our current relationships actually serve to lock our psychopathologies into place (Wachtel, 1993). The resolution of the question answers in part the related question of whether a manifestation of repetition-compulsion can be turned towards the positive.

One of the first theorists to take issue with Freud's view of repetition-compulsion was Otto Rank. Rank was the only non-physician in Sigmund Freud's 1906 select Viennese circle of followers, which also included William Stekel, Alfred Adler, Abraham Brill, Eugen Bleuler and Carl Jung, later joined by Sandor Ferenczi and Ernest Jones. But Freud and Rank had an ugly and traumatic break in their relationship. Rank believed that the separation process, not Oedipal rivalries and conflicts, was the primary obstacle to individualization and autonomy. Rank was a sociologist and psychoanalyst who believed that despite the pain and fear of life's myriad separations, one could will oneself toward self-discovery and development. Rank agreed that the likeness of an individual's present reactions to those reactions engendered by earlier situations was "a problem of great theoretical and practical importance" (1996, p. 108). However, he denied that any such set of reactions could be a strict replication, since no two experiences are ever alike. He writes:

Another point Freud overlooks in his concept of the "compulsion to repetition" is that between the original and current experience—indeed, even during the original experience, the ego undergoes a development that distinguishes the later reaction from the earlier one... It cannot be denied that the past, what has already been experienced, forms the human being, but this process is unintelligible if one considers only the experience and not the ego; which partly forms the experiences and reacts to them. (Rank, 1996, p. 103).

My own clinical observations lead me to believe that those who

suffer return to familiar situations that cause further suffering because these situations are familiar, but also because they feel worthless and deserving of their abuse; this works in concert with the cultural milieu that Hart & Brassard have described where “a positive ideology of children as human beings in their own right has not been established” (1987, p. 162).

However, over thirty years of experience has also led me to conclude that avoidable pain is chosen with the hope that one can finally find love and peace by remedying difficult situations, at long last “making it right.” Weiss states: “The therapeutic process is the process by which the patient works with the therapist at the task of disconfirming his pathogenic beliefs” (1993, p. 9). For example, in the case history of Benita which will soon follow, Benita’s relationship with the deceitful and dictatorial Eric provided hope for love, or at least acceptance, since what they shared, though enormously abusive, was such a stark divergence from the relationships Benita had known to that point. Such behavior, whether reactive or replicative, can manifest in every aspect of an emotionally-abused individual’s life: in his or her relationships with parents, partners, siblings, children, in social and community involvement, and in every type of organization, even those involving humanitarian efforts and objectives (Smullens, 2002a). Case histories that follow show, however, that pathologic beliefs can be disconfirmed in the therapeutic environment. These cases suggest that repetition-compulsion might eventually become repetition-identification, and eventually freedom.

Five Cycles of Emotional Abuse

In my experience what makes it most difficult to work with clients successfully is the struggle to find a common language in order to describe what went wrong and to find a way to address the obvious problems optimistically. It is my opinion that this language has to be comfortable for the professional to use, but it also has to be accessible for the clients, in this way clients can be brought into the problem solving process. A common language can also facilitate more cooperation and coordination of treatment efforts across disciplines

In an attempt to bring this clarity and productive approach to the evaluation and healing of the repetition-compulsion present in emotional abuse, I have divided emotional abuse into five cycles based not only on the original nature of the inflicted hurt, but developed through the behaviors that the abuse might manifest well into adulthood (Smullens, 2002a, 2002b). By presenting my own codifications which follow, I hope to provide subdivisions within the field of study that can enhance understanding of damaging caregiver behaviors, as well as lead to clear identification of developmental problems; their ramifications; effective treatment plans and preventive opportunities, and richer, more meaningful collaboration among disciplines as indicated

In treating cycles of emotional abuse, I use a combination of individual and group psychotherapy, offering the latter as an option as soon as the client feels ready. Most clients who have endured emotional abuse are at best ambivalent about participating in a group therapy experience. However, I encourage a discussion of this opportunity when I believe the progression from individual to group psychotherapy can be a positive one. A brief description of individual and group therapy approaches in my practice can be found following the upcoming concentration on each of the five cycles of emotional abuse. A more inclusive discussion of my group therapy model and use of an insight oriented five step InnerSelf Dialogue process to alter behaviors and attitudes can be found in my paper, “Developing An Emotional Sense of Direction: A Therapeutic Model for the Treatment of Emotional Abuse,” published in the Fall, 2003 Annals of the American Psychotherapy Association.

Within each category that follows I first describe the cycle of emotional abuse, then recount an actual client’s experience in therapy, changing only identifying data. Finally, I present some suggestions for how victims of a particular cycle can grow into survivors. This structure will hopefully allow the reader to share the insights that I have seen attained and the growth of clients that I have witnessed during the therapeutic process.

Figure 6.

Relationship Voice of Truth Quiz			
	Frequently	Sometimes	Never
I can be “me” with my life partner.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can say “No.”	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can say “Yes.”	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We can disagree, without my feeling desperate.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am calm and relaxed when bringing up difficult topics.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can be mildly critical without fear of the retaliation of emotional abuse.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My growth and individuality are important.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We can have fun.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We are intimate and physically close.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel enough trust to be able to divulge what is “really going on with me.”	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My thoughts and ideas are important.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
S/he treats me with respect in public.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
S/he treats me with respect in private.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The thought of my partner makes me feel content.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

The Emotional Abuse Cycle of Rage

“The urge to aggress is stronger than willpower. Acts of maltreatment are totally irrational and are the results of uncontrollable urges: psychological violence results from a loss of control by the parent due to these urges.” (Gagne & Bouchard, 2004, p. 124) These words well describe the anger that can permeate a home and can frighten individuals so badly that it keeps them from thinking for themselves, from learning to trust their own judgments or creating

their own paths (Hamarman & Bernet, 2000). It can also leave victims ill-equipped to deal with the legitimate emotional reactions of others. The rages that are experienced by those abused in this cycle can create feelings of terror and helplessness, which in turn immobilize emotionally abused individuals and render them helpless to express or assert themselves. They can also produce the opposite effect, one of replication; the following description (Ganzarain & Buchele, 1988) can be applied to the replication process in each of my five categories: “Victims frequently identify themselves with their abusers, behaving like them vis-à-vis other helpless victims or adopting their abuser’s attitudes and values. This paradoxical development is an instance of the defense mechanism of ‘identification with the aggressor’” (p. 38).

The Emotional Abuse Cycle of Rage: Celeste’s Story

Although I have codified emotional abuse into five distinct cycles, in reality there is a good deal of interconnection between cycles, as we will see in the following case history of Celeste, which has the rejection/abandonment cycle embedded into a more overt example of the cycle of rage.

Celeste’s mother was a classic illustration of rage: angry, cynical and bitter. She felt she had “married down” and treated her husband as if he were a chair to sit on or a living paycheck. Meanwhile, her ambitions for her children were almost as sky high as her daughter’s name: they were to be stars, in fact “celestial.” She expected her children to become fiercely ambitious as well as ruthless and taught them her full arsenal of verbally abusive maneuvers to complement their drives. Celeste’s mother taught her children that winning was everything and that it was fine to stab people in the back to get what they wanted. She also taught them how to be exceptionally charming. This was easy as they were bright, well-read and cultivated.

If Celeste questioned her mother’s tactics or her values, as punishment her mother screamed at her for days on end, labeling Celeste an ungrateful bitch. Then she would retreat into her room, not speaking to Celeste for days, embedding the rejection/abandonment cycle into her daughter’s pattern of coping with life, until Celeste apologized for, “being unkind to Mommy, who wants only the best for me.”

Celeste’s father had a very good heart and, though cowed by his wife’s rage, he reached out to Celeste, his favorite child. Celeste remained angry with her mother for what her anger did to everyone in

the family, but she was fearful of ever expressing that fact.

In time Celeste married a man who was as ambitious, charming and backstabbing as her mother. Like Celeste, he was raised in a home with constant anger, withdrawal patterns and the demand for success at all costs. Without realizing it, Celeste acted out her anger toward her mother and her husband on her friends, a wonderful circle of interesting people. However, any time one of them revealed pain or difficulty, Celeste took secret delight in ridiculing the person behind his or her back, even as she pretended to be solicitous. If anyone told her she was hurtful, her anger took the ingrained and familiar form of lashing out, followed by passive-aggressive withdrawal.

The healthy parts of Celeste’s personality, nurtured by her father’s love, acknowledged in therapy that her friends expressed upset with her, because they cared about the future of their relationships. But another part of Celeste took great delight in tormenting them—waiting until she had a solid political position, then attacking her friends, sometimes in public. The healthy individuals, the ones with the most self-esteem and no need or desire for emotional abuse in their lives, abandoned this “friendship.” One by one Celeste’s friends slipped away, until the only ones remaining in Celeste’s life were those seduced by her charm or those acquaintances and professional contacts that depended on her and feared her.

Right around the time that Celeste came to see me, a man who works in her law firm but who had no knowledge of our therapeutic relationship, described Celeste’s fortieth birthday party as “One of the saddest things I have ever seen: The only people there were her employees and a trickle of angry-looking friends. Toasts by employees were bland and nondescript. Those by friends were just plain mean.”

How could Celeste gain a better understanding of how her past cy-

Figure 7.

Self-Test for Emotional Abuse: The Workplace			
	Frequently	Sometimes	Never
I wish I were doing something else.	0	0	0
When I think about going to work, I feel vaguely sick.	0	0	0
Nothing I do is good enough for my boss.	0	0	0
Nothing I do is good enough to meet my own standards.	0	0	0
I feel sometimes like I am about to get fired, though there is really no reason to feel that way.	0	0	0
My coworkers and I struggle against each other for the boss’s approval.	0	0	0
My coworkers and I are not enthusiastic about our work.	0	0	0
At work, there is only one right way to do things.	0	0	0
I fantasize about leaving my job, even though I don’t feel I can.	0	0	0
I am disappointed by how my boss responds to my work.	0	0	0
My coworkers and I keep each other from achieving our goals.	0	0	0
I am jealous of other people’s working environments.	0	0	0
I am not satisfied by my own achievements.	0	0	0
I feel incompetent.	0	0	0
My boss mistreats me as did my mother.	0	0	0
My boss mistreats me as did my father.	0	0	0

cle of emotional abuse impinged on her adult reactions and choices? The first thing that she needed to do was to put an internal check on her behavior when acting out. Such clients are prone to angry outbursts, as their own rage bubbles up and eventually explodes. Anger management seminars can be very useful in dealing with this problem, as can a reconstructed attitude, one where clients identify that they are angry, and then learn to assure themselves that they can handle their own feelings. To achieve this psychological perspective, we can explore the following questions with them when their rage bubbles up: What is making you angry? What has the other person done? What are the general circumstances that the two of you are in? With these recognitions come choices. Without burying the anger or exploding into volcanic rhetoric, clients can learn a third approach: to resolve to stand their ground and speak for themselves about their truths. Victims of the emotional abuse cycle of rage need to be convinced that this is actually the best way for them to be heard. They may well fear that if their words don't have violence or great power they will not have meaning or be taken seriously. Social workers can help them to know that this is surely not the case.

As a parallel to this, a victim of the emotional abuse cycle of rage may not know how to ask for what they really want. They may have great difficulty validating their needs, become frightened easily with a quick "startle response" and be terrified of their own uncontrollable temper. It is likely that they live with a feeling of doom that the world or a situation will turn against them abruptly, through no fault of their own. They also may have developed a hardened shell which prevents them from taking personal responsibility for the life situations they have created out of their legacy of rageful abuse.

When victims of the abuse cycle of rage do come to some understanding of the hurt inflicted upon them, they can become overwhelmingly vulnerable. They might then find it useful to find a room with a door that locks and sit down in it alone, telling themselves that they are safe, that no one can come in without their permission. They should be encouraged to stay there, past when the novelty has worn off, breathing deeply and really feeling that they are alone, safe and no one can hurt them. They can then begin to learn how to carry this room with them when they do choose to leave, as a place inside of them that then can return to whenever they want.

The Emotional Abuse Cycle of Enmeshment

This cycle takes place in a family with a spoken or unspoken expectation that everyone needs to be together all of the time. There is no place for a closed door for privacy, for individual thoughts. The family is expected to be one enormous entity with no boundaries separating one from the other. Joint interests are mandated for the emotional security and safety of those in charge, whether they are parents or other caregivers. "The parent wants to see the child succeed in order to take credit for it or to experience that success through the child" (Gagne & Bouchard, 2004, p. 124). Those outside of the family unit are treated as outsiders. Enmeshment leaves an individual unable to feel and function like a whole and separate person or to choose other whole people with whom to develop meaningful friendships, to work with effectively, or to love intimately. Even if professional and financial success occurs, true intimacy exists only with blood family members. This is the par-

adox of the enmeshment cycle of emotional abuse: that so much "closeness" actually transpires within the context of isolation, as Hamarman & Bernet, 2000, have termed this category.

The cycle of enmeshment is one of the hardest to detect, and since emotional abuse is itself hard to detect, victims of this cycle get a "double-whammy." What appears as love or perhaps unusual closeness between family members is, on closer inspection, a round of games, traps, and irritation. Individuals who have been victims of enmeshment may feel that separating from their family of origin or, by extension, from an unhealthy love relationship or work experience will literally result in their death.

The Emotional Abuse Cycle of Enmeshment: *Lionel's Story*

My client, Lionel, is in his mid-forties. Lionel grew up in what he described as: "An unusually close family; we always took vacations together, even until I was in my late twenties. Friendships with other boys and, later, girls were to be kept to a minimum: My mother was very strict about how long I was on the phone and with whom. And dating was a whole other story..."

"But my relationship with my sister, Ellen (six years younger than Lionel), was always supposed to be special. And sometimes it was. But as the years went on I felt like I was constantly breaking her fall: taking care of her in a way that a father would, or a lover, more than an older brother.

"I lived with Ellen when she graduated from college. She was twenty-one and I was twenty-seven. Neither of us was dating anybody, because in a way we didn't have to, we had each other to talk to, to go with to places like the movies or restaurants. I guess you could say we were dating each other in a way.

"Then I met Karen, who turned out to be my soul mate. We started dating and later wanted to move in together, but both my parents and my sister made me feel guilty and said that I couldn't leave Ellen alone to fend for herself, that I was abandoning her.

One of the hardest things I have ever had to do was move out." Even after Lionel moved out, his problems with his sister were not resolved: When Lionel and Karen saw Ellen (and Rich, the boyfriend she had since acquired) Ellen maneuvered it so that she sat next to Lionel at dinner. Or she called Lionel and Karen's apartment at inappropriate times, like 1:30 AM, to discuss what the siblings were going to do about some minor family crisis. Ellen's focus, remaining on the nuclear family in which she and Lionel had grown up, became stifling to Lionel. Eventually he had to tell Ellen, in as direct terms as he and I could devise, to stop contacting him. Lionel's assertion was calming to Karen, who had begun to dread the kind of sibling situation in which she was smack in the middle.

Over time, as Lionel and I worked together, Lionel and Ellen did manage to evolve a way of talking constructively to one another. It began with a period of no communication at all; a "time out" between the two siblings. I have found that when I recommend a time out, those from an enmeshed home who have grown to rely on each other too much learn an appropriate respect for boundaries.

Ellen was delighted when Lionel and she resumed contact. The

separation helped Lionel to recognize and end a flirtation with his sister of which he was unaware. Ellen was more able, though somewhat grudgingly at first, to respect Lionel's space and his relationship with Karen. Moreover, her relationship with Rich began to grow. Both Ellen and Lionel felt free, truly free, for the first time in their lives.

If you think an individual has been a victim of the cycle of enmeshment, you can ask some of the following questions: Are you demanding that others fill holes in you that have been left by not enough love, or the denial of permission to define your own self? If so, why do you feel you have the right to demand this? What do you have to lose by allowing others to be whole and free?

Such a client might be advised to plan one step of freedom: take a trip, take a course at a local high school, some new experience which enriches them and that they do alone. The reason that I advise clients who suffer from the cycle of enmeshment to tell no one in their immediate environment of new found freedoms of expression is not to encourage them to hold onto an unhealthy secret. It is instead to encourage them to begin to carve out an area that is just theirs—and theirs alone! And to help them to know that they have this right of free, unfettered expression. Once they know and experience this profoundly new ability, they will begin to be ready to share with others who also know this importance. And it will be far easier to find such life experiences.

Another exercise I use is to place the name of an important person in the client's life whom they feel imprisons them (mother, father, sister, brother, boss, husband, wife, co-worker, friend) at the top of a sheet of paper. Clients then are advised to answer the following questions, noting their physical reactions as well as their emotional and mental ones:

- Why do you think _____ holds you so tightly bound to him or her?
- What purpose/purposes does it serve?
- How do you think he/she feels about your independence? Your individuality? Your success?
- What price are you allowing him/her to extract from you?
- Why?

Clients who are recovering from the emotional abuse cycle of enmeshment do not have to burn bridges or unnecessarily destroy relationships in order to become a whole individual person. Nevertheless, relationships without proper boundaries and healthy respect are paralyzing affairs that do not lead to an individual's manifesting his or her truest potential.

The Emotional Abuse Cycle of Rejection/Abandonment

When victims of this cycle of emotional abuse express an opinion that his or her parents or caregivers do not agree with, they withdraw their love, leaving the individual feeling isolated and terrified to think independently (Weiss, 1993). Only if the abused agrees with his or her parents or caretakers completely and sees everything through their eyes, will love be consistently shown, as we saw in the case of Celeste above. Rohner (1986) concludes that effects related to this cycle, may be expected to include emotional unresponsiveness, hostility or aggression, poor self-esteem and emotional instability.

Understandably, those enduring this cycle learn to view love and control as one and the same, as a weapon, and trust neither; which leaves them clinging, forever fearful of loss, or rejecting people who can offer fulfillment, growth, contentment. Victims of this cycle need to assess whether they have been drawn into intimate relationships that replicate their past, or if they are with those they can speak their minds to honestly. If every opinion expressed leads the other, be the person's boss, lover or friend, to withdraw from the conversation or become hostile, argumentative, or dictatorial, is this really a relationship that is worthy of continuation?

Clients who embody this cycle will often "test" their therapist by alternating between flattery and praise and expressions of righteous indignation and disappointment over minor or imaginary infractions (Weiss, 1993). Those who withdraw from others as a means of control are usually very afraid of revealing deep feelings of shame. By rejecting and abandoning others, they convince themselves that others have wronged them. If someone has been a victim of this cycle they can be encouraged by those they work with to practice new ways of communicating during sessions. In this way they can experience a part of their birthright that they have been denied, they are entitled to their individual opinions, insights, needs, and desires, and they need no one's permission to exert this right.

The Emotional Abuse Cycle of Rejection/Abandonment: *Benita's Story*

A talented writer and published poet, Benita grew up with a rejecting father and an emotionally unavailable mother. Before she reached the age of twenty-one, both of her parents died in a car accident. She married the next year. When Benita first came to see me she was so traumatized she could not speak. Instead, I asked her to put her problems on paper. This is what she wrote:

"My husband is a very handsome man with classic good looks. He charms everyone. When we first fell in love, my husband told me he loved me so much he'd kill me before he'd let me go. His intensity, his need for me, made me feel safe. I have come to realize, however, that Eric's words have nothing to do with love, everything to do with control and power and that I'm anything but safe.

"When we first started dating, Eric seemed calm, kind, patient and sophisticated. Educated abroad and well-traveled, he had a wealth of knowledge that fascinated me. He courted me intensely and I loved what I saw as our compatible interests. But as soon as we married, he stopped sharing his interests with me. He became dictatorial and deceitful, starting with small invasions of privacy. He repeatedly opened my mail and, if I questioned why, he would ask, 'Do you have something to hide?' Always, a terrible argument followed and he would stop talking to me. To keep the peace, I learned to keep quiet.

"Looking back now, it seems my marriage was doomed from the start. My husband had been raised to find a wife who came from a poor family; his mother told him, 'If she has money, you won't be able to control her. If she's poor, you'll be in charge, especially after the children come.'

"At first, I found our arguments impossible to bear. To keep peace, to make things right, I continually said I was wrong and apologized.

If I didn't, he would be silent or absent for hours or days. But lately I feel unable to continue this charade. I'm tired of being made to feel crazy every time we have a disagreement. I've begun to stand up to him and in response; Eric attacks me for attempting to change what he calls the 'contract' of our marriage.

"About two weeks ago, my close friend was visiting. As we chatted, Janet said something that stunned me: 'You and your husband are completely incompatible. I think you should leave him.'"

"What are you talking about?" I asked, shocked by her words. Janet and I have never even discussed my husband. I just assumed that she was charmed by him like everyone else I know.

"I need him," I said. "We have six-month-old twin boys. My parents are dead. I'd be lost without him."

"And that's just where he wants you," Janet responded, "feeling helpless and dependent. You have to toughen up."

"Then, three days ago, my housekeeper asked to speak with me.

"I don't know how to tell you this..." she began.

"Yes? What is it?"

"The night you spent in the hospital when the boys were terribly ill...well, something happened here."

"What? What happened?"

"I'm so sorry to be the one to tell you, but your husband had someone here—a woman, in your bed."

"That night, I confronted Eric. He told me I was crazy and then started packing a bag. He said he's going out of town for a week. He won't tell me where or how to reach him. Since that night I have felt unable to eat or even swallow—that's why I called your office."

As we've discussed, those experiencing the cycle of rejection/abandonment learned in childhood that they could not have a feeling, need, opinion or direction that their parents did not approve of. If they said something their parents didn't like, the result was a withdrawal of love, their physi-

cal presence or both. Obviously, this leads individuals to fear any semblance of fulfilling intimate relationships.

What victims of this particular cycle of emotional abuse need more than anything is to seek out a relationship with someone who will be there on whatever relationship level they can find comfortable. Ideally, this will be someone who will appreciate good intentions. Volunteering at a hospital is a wonderful example, as some patients will really appreciate their being there and will tell them so. Some patients may be angry about their own lives and illnesses and may lash out and refuse contact with them, but this, too, is good practice; practice in withstanding rejection, and in understanding that these individuals' acting out has nothing to do with the client personally.

Those suffering from rejection/abandonment might make a list of people in their lives with whom they have fledgling relationships or associations. If these relationships never seem to go anywhere, look at these situations a little more deeply. Was the client afraid of getting comfortable with these people when things really might have been all right? Was the client so afraid of abandonment that he/she abandoned the other before the other had a chance to reject?

The Emotional Abuse Cycle of Complete Neglect

In this emotional abuse cycle no one was there for the abused, ever. This cycle is called "ignoring" by Hamarman & Bernet (2000) and includes a deprivation of essential stimulation and responsiveness. The child's basic needs like food and clothing may have been met but there was never a feeling of emotional closeness or any substantive conversations. Alternately, Kent, Waller & Dagnan define this cycle as: "Experiences of loneliness, feeling unwanted, being of no interest to others, and feeling largely responsible for one's needs" (1999, p.162.). This cycle is in many ways an extension and an extreme case of the previous cycle: rejection/abandonment. Like rejection and abandonment, the cycle of complete neglect leaves an abused individual fearful and often isolated and alone, but without any confidence whatsoever to reach out.

This cycle is desperately painful, and individuals who have suffered from it must

bring into their lives people who are kind and caring. Yet because of the nature of the abuse, these individuals have probably avoided intimate relationships most of all. Chances are strong that when quality love was offered, by a friend, partner, or community member, it simply wasn't recognized for what it was. And it was either ignored or rebuffed.

The Emotional Abuse Cycle of Complete Neglect: April's Story

April's parents neglected her in favor of their other daughter Catherine in part because April received the skin coloration of the two girls' paternal grandmother, who was hated by both her son and daughter-in-law. In addition, Catherine was long-legged and athletic, a gifted pianist with a beautiful singing voice—all crucial qualities to parents who were climbing the social ladder and denying their pasts. April, on the other hand, had hair that was, in her mother's words, "dirty, ugly, and unruly." She was ignored at meals and comforted herself with books at bedtime. By the time April was six she understood the concept of hate and verbalized that her parents hated her. Desperate to feel wanted she compulsively reached out to her sister, a pattern that continued until the day that April, age 12, begged Catherine to invite her to accompany her and their mother to a fashion luncheon. On the schoolyard Catherine screamed out for all to hear: "Can't you see that I hate you as much as Mom and Dad do! Get away from me! Just having you near me makes me feel ugly, like you." That weekend April attempted suicide.

I met April a few years after these events. She had been hospitalized following her suicide attempt, and had eventually come to be adopted by foster parents. Although April had been in individual therapy since that time, she was referred to me for group therapy because she was painfully shy and withdrawn. April and I had a very positive first meeting, and although she was reluctant to enter a group, she said she was willing to try. I chose one where I knew certain members would be most respectful of her extreme sensitivity. (There are usually three or four time-limited groups in my practice at any one time; clients sometimes join after the group's beginning, which was the case with April.) April did not say anything for the first several meetings, either about herself or in response to the stories of the others. However, after a month

she started interacting with the group through brief verbal expressions and changes in affect (laughter, sighs, etc.) Group therapy became practice in how to live in the world that her parents and sister had cruelly withheld from her. By the conclusion of her first group experience (nine months), April was able to share some degree of emotion and allow for some closeness. We worked together in group therapy for seven more years, with April entering a new group each year. The inevitability of each group's ending propelled April to share more and more of her life with her colleagues in group. Their compassion healed her. April is now happily married, a nurse, and the mother of two.

As we can see from this case history, the cycle of complete neglect is desperately painful. Those who have suffered from it must bring into their lives people who are kind and caring as a replacement for the parents who gave and cared so little, if at all. They must speak to themselves every day about deserving to be cared for and treated with respect by those who are capable of this quality of mutual respect. It may help if they find a mantra that expresses this and paste it on their bedroom or bathroom mirrors.

Those who have suffered complete neglect must keep their eyes open and reach out to people who are capable of kind, quality interaction. It may be difficult, because they are used to overlooking those people due to their belief that they are not worthy enough to join them in relaxing, harmonious, caring human discourse. When they do encounter positive people either at their workplace or by joining a book club, a cooking class or discussion group, they often remark on the sheer fun that other people, the right people, can be.

But there may be victims of this emotional abuse cycle who are not ready for extensive human contact. For these individuals I recommend getting a pet or a plant to nurture. Such an activity is a good place to begin. By participating in helping another living organism to grow, they stimulate their own growth at the same time. At last they are on the path of realizing what a glorious thing it is to give.

The Emotional Abuse Cycle of Extreme Overprotection and Overindulgence

When I first identified this cycle in 2002, I called it "Extreme Overprotection" (Smullens, 2002a, 2002b). I now see this cycle more clearly identified by the fuller term above. This cycle of emotional abuse involves the parental compulsion to protect children from all the difficulties of life, and often lavish them with too much of everything. This parental practice "functions to emulate or to protect the child against harmful influences that are liable to interfere with his or her success" (Gagne & Bouchard, 2004, p. 124). Children caught in this cycle do not learn how to face life's realities, and in doing so, be strengthened. The result is adults, often well-educated and accomplished, who feel crippled without constant parental support and indulgence. Like those who have been victims of enmeshment, those who have been overprotected in an extreme fashion fear that any normal separation process will mean death; the death of their parents as well as their own death. This leaves them feeling (regardless of their academic or professional accomplishments) that they cannot handle their world sufficiently and that no one can ever be allowed to become as important to them or help them as much as their parents. As in enmeshment, as their parents age or after their deaths, their suffocating "loyalties" (and the demands that accompany them) are shifted to their

partners, siblings, children, friends, employees and co-workers (Smullens, 2002b).

Extreme parental overprotection smothers a child just when they are at an age to express their individuality and seek a measure of independence. Crippling messages are received such as: I must live to satisfy my parents; I am the center of my parents' lives and happiness; without them to care for me, I won't be able to handle my life.

The Emotional Abuse Cycle of Extreme Overprotection and Overindulgence: Nathan's Story

An attractive and highly successful lawyer, Nathan, aged forty when we met, had parents who cushioned his road and lived to respond to his every demand. This, of course, was a long standing pattern, and resulted in his mother and father acting more like servants than human beings. By focusing only on Nathan and his never-ending whims, they crippled their son, keeping him from the ability to develop mature relationships, and hid from their own festering problem.

Nathan consulted me because he was unable to develop any intimate relationships, in his words, "beyond what I adore with my parents." He shared his fear, more precisely his terror, that his parents were aging, and he didn't believe that anyone he met could do as much for him as they had ever done and continued to do. He also described a feeling of loneliness. Throughout all of his professional honors and successes in life it was his mother and not his wife who was by his side, with his father close behind. This left Nathan the consummate playboy, selecting only "gorgeous" women in their 20s for one night stands.

Individuals who suffer from extreme overprotection and overindulgence often suffer from empathic failure, as their entire household while growing up has revolved around them. In his work with his therapeutic group Nathan displayed great insight when it came to other people. He was capable of listening and of asking probing yet appropriate questions. It was only when the subject came around to him that he either froze or gave answers that were ruthless and brutal. When Nathan was told that his means of response was not acceptable and that his colleagues in group expected him to look more deeply into the reasons for his unkind and mean-spirited expressions, he became very angry and left the group before the mid-point. A subsequent telephone call and letter from me went unanswered.

This example is by no means a suggestion that clients who may fit the prototype of extreme overprotection cannot succeed in group therapy, but merely to illustrate the mechanism by which a client's own intentions to confront his or her emotional abuse cycle can break down. In fact, in my experience, clients who suffer from extreme overprotection and overindulgence are more than likely to flourish in a world of freer decision-making, once they have made a true commitment to the group and themselves. In fact, this is precisely what happened with Nathan. His mother died a year and a half after he left group therapy. Bereft and terrified, he came into a new group determined to confront his demons, fearing, in his words, "If I do not, my mother will take me to the grave with her." Nathan worked in three subsequent groups. A breakthrough happened in the second group when a colleague told him she felt very sad because of all that he had missed. Allowing her genuine con-

cern to reach him, he wept uncontrollably. Soon after this he began to date in a new and responsive way, and a year later he married a widow, a few years younger than he, with two latency aged children.

The abuse cycle of extreme overprotection and overindulgence is difficult to change because it involves parents who believe that their smothering and desire to live through their children is the deepest expression of love possible and children who are used to this expression and dependent upon it. Children of overprotective parents are used to parents who will do all they can to spare them from life's inevitable. They are used to it, and though deep down they find it suffocating, they are terrified to give it up. Yet, in the end these children have had the road too cushioned for them. They have grown to rely on and look forward to overprotection and overindulgence, and are incapacitated when it comes to handling life's disappointments or developing the confidence to make mistakes, learn from them, and move on.

A wonderful exercise for victims of this cycle of abuse is to do something that makes them happy and that they can accomplish all by themselves. It could be an activity like going for a hike, or going to see a singer-songwriter at the local concert hall. The challenge should come not from the difficulty of the activity but in being the only one that they can rely on. A good exercise is to go out to dinner alone before the concert, negotiate the parking and the directions, and determine the timing of the entire evening by themselves.

With successes in this type of exercise, the client can be encouraged to move on, with the same spirit of adventure, to another area of life where the stakes are higher.

They can use the same spirit of independence to tackle a diet or an exercise program. Eventually, I have seen these small triumphs build up and result in a landslide-like shifting of career choices and dating patterns. Often individuals in this cycle come to realize that what they have been protected from is far less dangerous, and far more interesting, than they had previously believed.

Use of the Cycles in Individual Therapy

By now it should be clear that serious communication, intimacy, and control problems in relationships which are routinely addressed in therapy almost always emanate from one or a combination of perpetuating cycles of emotional abuse. A didactic understanding of the cycles of emotional abuse is important, not only for the practitioner, but for the client as well, as such knowledge often alleviates the extreme anxiety that impedes intensive psychotherapy.

When a client consults me for psychotherapy I invite him or her to frame the presenting problem in the form of a question. "Can I make my relationship with my parents, partner, son, daughter, in-law, employer, etc. more positive?" "Is it possible to find out why extramarital affairs have been necessary?" "I have never been happy, why is that?" "I have repeated conflict with my boss and others in positions of authority, what does that say about me?" I tell clients that in time they will begin to understand how the cycles of abuse in their formative years have led to their feelings of confusion expressed in their questions. With insight they will see what cycles or combination of cycles have deterred their directions and opportunities for fulfillment in friendship, work, and love, and in this way begin the process of setting themselves free.

Use of the Cycles in Group Therapy

When the codifications above are used to construct a group, clients are placed in groups with others who will remind them of those they have lost, are estranged from, or are having ongoing difficulty with. The group therapy setting is designed to offer clients the opportunity both to understand and to heal. They are encouraged to say exactly what is on their minds. However, the expectation is to understand, identify, and feel anger, rage, hostility and hatred—and to express it, but not to act it out through ugly tantrum explosions or the silent kind of tantrum, sulking. In this way the group works toward self respect and mutual respect in interactions. Often assignments discussed in earlier sections of this paper are suggested. In time, clients grow more comfortable understanding and discussing the impact of the cycles of abuse they have endured on their self-image and confidence. And they take pride in seeing the changes in themselves and their group colleagues. Experiencing an environment rich

with relationships with others who care about them will help them find this quality of activity, communication and respect in the world outside of the treatment room. In a setting offering kindness and compassion clients become able to develop an "emotional sense of direction" (Smullens, 2002c).

Conclusion

Emotional abuse is a cycle: a pattern that repeats for generations, a form that remains the same, while the content of the specific individual changes over time. Until clients are able to recognize and understand their destructive and repetitive behavior, those who endured emotional abuse as children seek it out instinctively again and again in all facets of their lives. Or, they become skilled abusers, who have taken the pain, rage and hurt experienced in childhood and projected it into the world outside them.

Often those propagating emotional abuse are oblivious to the negativity and severity of their action; they may be, and probably are, simply replicating their own experience in childhood. They instinctively find their victims and proceed to push the buttons of those susceptible to their message and behaviors. Endurers of such abuse internalize their reactions, becoming in time physically or emotionally ill, or they may scapegoat others in abusive retaliation.

But just as a cycle continues, it can also be broken. From my clinical experience, I have seen literally thousands of people turn their lives around by accepting the life story into which they were born, and then achieve the determination to rewrite a present and future that affirm a sense of dignity denied them in their childhood. Through this process, clients learn to assert themselves, find and maintain satisfying love and work relationships and develop a chosen community that sustains them. These relationships in turn empower clients to break free of the victimization of familiar, repetitive cycles of abuse and claim a life based on self-respect and an emerging ability to choose relationships worthy of mutual respect.

Postscript: What is not Emotional Abuse

Often parents who read material on emotional abuse become frightened that even their smallest insensitivities may be abusive to their children, fearing that they

have strayed into one of the five cycles with an offhand word, intonation, or action. The cycles described above that constitute abuse, however, are consistent and unyielding. Parents are, after all, human and have “off days.” Each of us is, at times, hurtful to those dear to us. But in fortunate homes, there is not a predominance of one or more cycle. I have developed the Parent Empathy Guide, which helps parents to assess their own parenting skills and philosophies, and hold onto important guidelines. This guide is based on the one introduced as a medical school teaching guide by Thomas J. Nasca, M.D., Dean of Thomas Jefferson Medical College, and I am indebted to him for his keen insights. Dr. Nasca’s guide is entitled “The Jefferson Scale of Physician Empathy: An Opportunity for Self-Assessment and Self-Reflection.” The Parent Empathy Guide follows:

- a) I try to put myself in my children’s shoes when caring for them.
- b) I try to understand my children’s feelings and give them a sense of validation.
- c) I try to understand what is going on in their minds by paying attention and really caring about what they say, what they ask of me, and their non-verbal clues and body language.
- d) I let myself be touched by what my children are going through, but I’m still able to see them as people separate from me.
- e) I know a good sense of humor is important.
- f) I can put aside my own projects and activities if my child needs me.
- g) Still, I know it’s important to have my own life.

About The Author

SaraKay Smullens is a Philadelphia based clinical social worker and writer with an active practice in individual, couple and group psychotherapy. She has brought professional and public attention to emotional abuse, and has received numerous awards for her work in domestic violence prevention and her codification of the destructive and perpetuating cycles of emotional abuse. SaraKay is the founder of the Philadelphia based interfaith coalition, the Sabbath of Domestic Peace, which has identified clergy as “the missing link” in

addressing the epidemic of domestic violence. Her work appears in peer reviewed journals, and she is the best selling author of “Whoever Said Life is Fair?: A Guide To Growing Through Life’s Injustices” and “Setting Your Self Free: Breaking the Cycle of Emotional Abuse in Family, Friendship, Love and Work.” She has been certified as a group psychotherapist by the American Group Psychotherapy Association and as a certified family life educator by the National Council on Family Relationships.

References

Ali, Alisha, et. al. (2000). *Emotional Abuse, Self-Blame, and Self-Silencing in Women With Irritable Bowel Syndrome. Psychosomatic Medicine*, 62, 76-82

American Humane Fact Sheet. (2004). *Emotional Abuse*. Englewood, CO.

Claussen, A.H., and Crittenden, P.M. (1991). *Physical and Psychological Maltreatment: Relations Among Types of Maltreatment. Child Abuse & Neglect*, 15 (1-2), 5-18.

Cohn, A. H. (1987) *It Shouldn’t Hurt to Be a Child*. rev. ed. Chicago: National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse.

Freud, S. (1974). *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (J. Strachey, Trans.). London: Hogarth (Original work published 1920).

Gagné, M-H., and Bouchard, C. (2004). *Family Dynamics Associated with the Use of Psychologically Violent Parental Practices. Journal of Family Violence*, 19 (2), 117-130.

Ganzarain, R.C., and Buchele, B.J. (1988). *Fugitives of Incest: A Perspective from Psychoanalysis and Groups*. Madison, CT: International Universities Press.

Garbarino, J., Guttman, E., and Seeley, J.W. (1986). *The Psychologically Battered Child*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Glaser, D. (2004). *Child Abuse and Neglect and the Brain – A Review. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 41 (1) 97-116.

Hamarman, S., and Bernet, W. (2000). *Evaluating and Reporting Emotional Abuse in Children: Parent-Based, Action-Based Focus Aids in Clinical Decision-Making. Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 39 (7), 928-930.

Hart, S., and Brassard, M. (1987). *A Major Threat to Children’s Health: Psychological Maltreatment. American Psychologist*, 42 (2), 160-165.

Higgins, D.J., and McCabe, M.P. (2000). *Multi-Type Maltreatment and the Long-Term Adjustment of Adults. Child Abuse Review*, 9, 6-18.

Kent, A., Waller, G., and Dagnan, D. (1999). *A Greater Role of Emotional than Physical or Sexual Abuse in Predicting Disordered Eating Attitudes: The Role of Mediating Variables. International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 25, 159-167.

Melton, G.B., and Davidson, H.A. (1987). *Child Protection and Society: When Should the State Intervene? American Psychologist*, 42 (2), 172-175.

Mullen, P.E., Martin, J.L., Anderson, J.C., Romans, S.E., and Herbison, G.P. (1996). *The Long-Term Impact of the Physical, Emotional, and Sexual Abuse of Children: A Community Study. Child Abuse & Neglect*, 20 (1), 7-21.

O’Hagan, K.P. (1995). *Emotional and Psychological Abuse: Problems of Definition. Child Abuse & Neglect*, 19 (4), 449-461.

Porcerelli, J.H., West, P.A., Binienda, J., and Cogan, R. (2006). *Physical and Psychological Symptoms in Emotionally Abused and Non-abused Women. Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine*, 19, 201-204.

Rank, O. (1996). *A Psychology of Difference*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

The Sabbath of Domestic Peace. (1999/2006). *Making Changes, Bringing Hope*. Phila., MF: Sabbath of Domestic Peace.

Emotional Abuse

Post-Test Questions for 1.5 CEs

Please circle the correct answer(s) for each question. All answers come from the preceding article.

- According to Weiss, a difference between control mastery and repetition compulsion is:
 - Repetitions of a client's childhood experiences are habitual expressions of one's reality.
 - Repetitions of a client's childhood experiences are due to his or her current relationships which lock psychopathologies into place.
 - Repetitions of a client's childhood experiences are purposefully brought about by them to test pathogenic beliefs.
 - Repetitions of a client's childhood experiences exist because of the death-drive, or the human tendency toward self-destruction.
- According to Higgins & McCabe, what is the most prevalent form of abuse?
 - Emotional abuse
 - Sexual abuse
 - Physical abuse
 - Multi-type maltreatment
- A client who reports being fearful, isolated and lacking confidence has probably experienced which cycle of emotional abuse?
 - Enmeshment
 - Rage
 - Rejection/Abandonment
 - Complete Neglect
- If a client had joint interests with her family mandated in childhood, which cycle of emotional abuse did she experience?
 - Enmeshment
 - Extreme Overprotection and Overindulgence
 - Rage
 - Rejection/Abandonment
- Rank broke with Freud in part because he considered the following a primary obstacle to individualization and autonomy:
 - The compulsion of the human psyche to repeat traumatic events
 - Oedipal rivalries and conflicts
 - Physical or sexual abuse, and to a considerably lesser degree, emotional abuse
 - The separation process
- Individuals who are often well-educated and accomplished, may nonetheless suffer from this cycle, where they feel crippled without parental support:
 - Enmeshment
 - Extreme Overprotection and Overindulgence
 - Rejection/Abandonment
 - Rage
- Survivors of which cycles of emotional abuse need most to cultivate a sense of adventure through activities that they can accomplish on their own:
 - Rage, and Rejection/Abandonment
 - Enmeshment, and Rage
 - Complete Neglect, and Rejection/Abandonment
 - Extreme Overprotection, and Enmeshment
- Emotional abuse has remained largely hidden from the public eye because of all the following reasons, except:
 - Emotional abuse leaves no physical scars to mark its impact
 - Emotional abuse is experienced largely through relationships rather than events
 - Emotional abuse has not been the focus of recent study
 - Emotional abuse is so pervasive
- Which of the following behaviors does not constitute abuse:
 - Separating from a child to view them as a distinct individual
 - Inability to put aside personal projects to attend to a child's needs
 - Constant criticizing or belittling of a child
 - Placing unreasonable expectations and demands on a child
- Which cycle of emotional abuse is prone to view love and control as one and the same thing:
 - Rage
 - Enmeshment
 - Complete Neglect
 - Rejection/Abandonment
- The cycle of enmeshment is one of the hardest to detect.
 - True
 - False
- Survivors of which cycle of emotional abuse have probably avoided intimate relationships most of all?
 - Rage
 - Complete Neglect
 - Rejection/Abandonment
 - Extreme Overprotection and Overindulgence
- For roughly how many years has emotional abuse been the focus of academic study and codification?
 - 100
 - 50
 - 20
 - 10
- In the Emotional Abuse Inventory, a breakpoint score of over 6 points indicates probable childhood abuse.
 - True
 - False
- According to the text, case histories show that repetition-compulsion can become:
 - Repetition-organization
 - Repetition-identification
 - Repetition-acceptance
 - Repetition-refusal

Focus CE Course Evaluation - February 2007

Emotional Abuse

Please indicate whether the following learning objectives were achieved:

1. To have a greater understanding of the prevalence of emotional abuse, as well as the reasons why it has remained relatively hidden from the public eye.

Achieved in full 5 4 3 2 1 Not Achieved

2. To be able to discuss some of the major theories regarding the mechanism of abuse in general and emotional abuse in particular.

Achieved in full 5 4 3 2 1 Not Achieved

2. To be able to identify five cycles of emotional abuse and possible treatment whether in group or individual therapy or counseling.

Achieved in full 5 4 3 2 1 Not Achieved

Please evaluate the course content:

4. This course expanded my knowledge and understanding of the topic.

Achieved in full 5 4 3 2 1 Not Achieved

5. The course material was clear and effective in its presentation.

Achieved in full 5 4 3 2 1 Not Achieved

6. This course was relevant to my professional work/interests.

Achieved in full 5 4 3 2 1 Not Achieved

7. As a result of this course, I learned new skills, interventions or concepts.

Achieved in full 5 4 3 2 1 Not Achieved

8. The resources/references were comprehensive and useful.

Achieved in full 5 4 3 2 1 Not Achieved

9. This course addressed issues of diversity and/or the social justice implications of the topic.

Achieved in full 5 4 3 2 1 Not Achieved

10. Please provide comments on current course and suggestions for future courses.

Please enclose check payable to NASW (*Sorry, credit cards not accepted for this offer.*)

Members \$15 Non Members \$25

Send to: NASW, 14 Beacon Street #409, Boston, MA 02108

◆ **Complete and return both Post-Test and Course Evaluation.**

A score of 80% or better is passing and we will send a certificate of completion for **1.5 CEs** to you. ◆

Name _____ Membership# _____

Address _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Day Phone _____ Email _____