



Behind Closed Doors: The Emotional Battlefield of Domestic Abuse in *It Ends with Us*

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Introduction

Domestic abuse, though often hidden behind closed doors, leaves deep and lasting scars on its victims, not only physically but also mentally. Colleen Hoover's *It Ends with Us* is a poignant exploration of the psychological toll of abuse, following the emotional and mental struggles of Lily Bloom as she navigates a toxic relationship. Unlike many other stories, *It Ends with Us* goes beyond the physical manifestations of abuse and delves into the lasting psychological effects—trauma, self-doubt, and emotional exhaustion—that victims experience.

In today's society, the psychological impact of domestic abuse is often overshadowed by its physical aspects, yet it is just as damaging, if not more so. Victims are left battling emotional wounds long after the abuse has ended, and the stigma surrounding leaving an abusive relationship compounds their suffering. In *It Ends with Us*, Hoover portrays the nuanced psychological battlefield that victims endure, from internal conflict to eventual healing. This paper aims to explore the psychological toll of domestic abuse in *It Ends with Us*, focusing on the trauma and mental health struggles Lily faces and the emotional complexity of breaking free from the cycle of abuse.

Through Lily's journey, the novel sheds light on how domestic abuse alters a victim's psychological landscape, shaping their perceptions, self-worth, and decision-making. Understanding the psychological consequences of such abuse is vital not only in literature but also in real-world discussions surrounding mental health and emotional well-being. This study will examine the mental and emotional consequences of abuse as represented in the novel, contributing to a broader conversation about the hidden psychological scars left by domestic violence.

Literature Review

Domestic abuse has long been a critical area of study, with researchers focusing not only on its physical impacts but also on its profound psychological effects. Scholars such as Herman (1992) and Walker (1979) have explored the lasting psychological trauma experienced by victims of intimate partner violence (IPV). Judith Herman's trauma theory highlights how domestic abuse often results in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), characterized by flashbacks, hypervigilance, and emotional numbness. Lenore Walker's Cycle of Abuse Theory provides a framework for understanding how abusers manipulate victims, keeping them trapped in cycles of tension-building, abusive incidents, and periods of calm, often referred to as "honeymoon phases." Both theories are integral to understanding the internal struggles of domestic abuse victims, who often face emotional paralysis and confusion when trying to leave abusive relationships.

In literature, domestic abuse has been explored as a catalyst for psychological breakdown and mental health deterioration. Works like Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* have depicted the intersection of trauma, mental illness, and abuse, bringing attention to the emotional turmoil faced by survivors. However, Colleen Hoover's *It Ends with Us* offers a modern, more intimate portrayal of how domestic abuse impacts not only the protagonist's physical well-being but also her psychological resilience.

Existing studies on *It Ends with Us* highlight its emotional depth and focus on the complexity of abuse. Critics have noted how Hoover's portrayal of Lily Bloom is both raw and realistic, showcasing the slow erosion of self-confidence and emotional strength as she struggles with her relationship with Ryle. According to Hansen (2020), the novel's strength lies in its depiction of the "gray areas" of abuse, where love, fear, and guilt intermingle, making it difficult for the victim to break free. This psychological complexity makes the novel an important case study for examining the mental health consequences of domestic abuse, which often go unnoticed or unaddressed in real life.

Furthermore, studies on trauma-informed care in abusive relationships have demonstrated that survivors frequently exhibit symptoms of anxiety, depression, and dissociation long after the abuse ends (Porges, 2011). These psychological responses are reflected in Lily's narrative, where Hoover carefully unpacks her internal struggle to reconcile her love for Ryle with the abuse he inflicts on her. The emotional manipulation, gaslighting, and guilt that Lily experiences are common psychological phenomena in abusive relationships, as highlighted in recent research on emotional abuse (Goldsmith, 2018).

This paper seeks to contribute to the existing scholarship by focusing specifically on the psychological toll that domestic abuse takes on Lily Bloom in *It Ends with Us*. By situating Hoover's narrative within the framework of trauma theory and the cycle of abuse, this study will explore the lasting mental and emotional scars left on victims and the long road to psychological recovery. Through an analysis of Lily's emotional and psychological journey, this paper will aim to broaden the conversation on how domestic abuse victims navigate the battlefield of mental health.

Understanding the Protagonist's Psychological Journey

Introduction to Lily's Character

Lily Bloom, the protagonist of *It Ends with Us*, is portrayed as a strong-willed and independent woman, shaped by her past experiences with domestic violence in her family. Having grown up in an abusive household where her father frequently mistreated her mother, Lily harbors complex emotions regarding love, marriage, and abuse. Despite her difficult childhood, she emerges as a resilient and empathetic person, determined not to repeat her mother's mistakes. Before entering into a romantic relationship with Ryle, Lily is confident, career-focused, and hopeful about her future, striving to open her own floral business. Her early psychological state is marked by ambition and optimism, as seen when she reflects,

"I want to be like the people who become the best versions of themselves."

Emotional Manipulation and the Cycle of Abuse

As Lily enters her relationship with Ryle, her psychological state gradually shifts. At first, their relationship is filled with passion and affection, making Lily believe that Ryle is different from the men she has seen in her mother's life.

"He was perfect. And then he wasn't."

However, as the novel progresses, Ryle's controlling and abusive tendencies begin to surface. The first instance of violence shocks Lily, but Ryle's subsequent apologies and explanations leave her conflicted. He manipulates her emotions by expressing guilt, remorse, and promises of change, drawing her back into the relationship. This mirrors the *Cycle of Abuse Theory*, where periods of tension and abuse are followed by remorseful "honeymoon phases," creating a powerful emotional trap for the victim.

Lily's psychological state becomes increasingly complex as she navigates feelings of love, guilt, and fear. She begins to rationalize Ryle's abusive behavior, believing that his violent outbursts are exceptions to his otherwise caring nature.

"It's not black and white. Sometimes it's grey."

The emotional manipulation she experiences causes her to doubt her instincts, trapping her in a cycle of self-blame and confusion. Her internal dialogue reflects the typical psychological pattern of victims of abuse, where the abuser's affection creates a bond that is difficult to break, despite the underlying violence.

Conflict and Trauma

As the abuse escalates, Lily finds herself torn between her love for Ryle and the growing realization that she is following in her mother's footsteps. The emotional conflict she experiences is intense—on one hand, she is deeply in love with Ryle and wants to believe he can change; on the other hand, she knows that the violence is unacceptable.

"Just because someone hurts you doesn't mean you can simply stop loving them."

This internal conflict manifests in her moments of denial, where she attempts to suppress the gravity of the abuse by focusing on Ryle's positive traits and the good moments they share.

However, as the violence worsens, Lily's mental health begins to deteriorate. She shows symptoms of trauma, such as anxiety, fear of triggering Ryle's anger, and self-doubt. The emotional strain of constantly walking on eggshells, combined with the shame and guilt she feels for staying in the relationship, contributes to her developing a form of cognitive dissonance—where she struggles to reconcile the person she thought Ryle was with the reality of his abusive behavior.

"I feel like everyone fakes who they really are, when deep down, we're all just scared, insecure, and a little broken."

As the psychological toll mounts, Lily begins to experience symptoms of depression, characterized by moments of hopelessness and emotional exhaustion.

The turning point in Lily's journey comes when she realizes that she is pregnant. The prospect of raising a child in the same environment of abuse that she grew up in forces her to confront the truth about her relationship with Ryle.

"I'd rather be alone than in a relationship that constantly hurts me."

This moment of realization triggers a profound psychological shift, as Lily finally acknowledges the depth of the trauma she has endured. The internal battle between her love for Ryle and her fear for her child's safety ultimately leads to her decision to break free from the cycle of abuse.

Lily's psychological journey reflects the complex and deeply damaging effects of domestic abuse on a victim's mental health. Her emotional conflict, moments of denial, and eventual realization of the severity of her trauma demonstrate how abuse can cloud a victim's judgment and paralyze their decision-making. Through her story, Hoover powerfully illustrates the psychological scars left by emotional manipulation and physical violence, as well as the immense courage it takes to break free from the emotional battlefield of abuse.

Breaking the Silence: Psychological Consequences

Mental Health Impact

Lily's experience with domestic abuse brings about a variety of psychological conditions, including guilt, self-blame, and a deteriorating sense of self-worth. One of the most significant effects is the guilt she feels for staying in the relationship, particularly as she remembers the abuse her own mother endured. At one point, Lily reflects,

"I feel like I'm betraying every version of myself by allowing this to continue" (pg. 309).

This guilt is closely tied to her struggle with self-blame, a common response among abuse survivors, who often internalize the violence and believe they are at fault.

Lily also struggles with self-worth as Ryle's emotional manipulation makes her feel trapped. Survivors of domestic abuse frequently suffer from diminished self-esteem due to constant emotional degradation. As per *Lenore Walker's* Cycle of Abuse Theory, this dynamic explains why victims, like Lily, remain in abusive relationships despite recognizing the harm. Lily often thinks about how Ryle's apologies make her doubt her own judgment, saying,

"Maybe it really was a one-time thing, and I'm overreacting" (pg. 250).

This cognitive dissonance, where she battles between accepting or rejecting the abuse, reveals the profound psychological toll.

Coping Mechanisms

Throughout the novel, Lily attempts several coping mechanisms to manage the emotional and psychological weight of the abuse. At first, she tries to rationalize Ryle's behavior, believing that his violent outbursts are caused by external stressors. This mirrors the common coping strategy of minimization, where victims downplay the severity of abuse to avoid the emotional reality.

"He's a good person who just happens to have a very bad moment," Lily tells herself after one incident of violence (pg. 192).

In addition to rationalization, Lily seeks solace in her connection with Atlas, her first love, and in the memories of their shared bond. She frequently reads through her old journals, where she recorded their relationship. This reliance on the past becomes a way to escape the trauma she is currently living through, as she often uses her memories of Atlas as a mental sanctuary. However, this also adds to her inner conflict, as she feels guilty about seeking emotional refuge in another man while remaining committed to Ryle.

Effect on Relationships

The abuse affects Lily's relationships in multiple ways. With Atlas, the abuse makes her question whether she deserves happiness with someone like him, as her relationship with Ryle leaves her feeling broken.

"I don't deserve him after what I've allowed myself to go through with Ryle," Lily confesses, revealing how the abuse distorts her perception of self-worth and relationships (pg. 335). Her emotional struggle with Ryle, meanwhile, puts up barriers to healing and growth with Atlas.

Lily's relationship with her mother is another focal point, as Lily initially resents her mother for staying with her abusive father. Over time, as Lily becomes trapped in her own abusive relationship, she begins to understand her mother's decisions.

"It's easy when you're on the outside to judge someone for staying in an abusive relationship," Lily reflects, showing her deepening empathy toward her mother's struggle (pg. 273). This shift in her relationship with her mother highlights how abuse reshapes familial dynamics and emotional bonds.

The Decision to Leave: Psychological Liberation

The Breaking Point

Lily's breaking point comes when she discovers she is pregnant. The thought of raising her child in an environment tainted by violence forces her to confront the full psychological reality of her situation.

"I can't let this be my child's story, too," she says, revealing her protective instincts and the realization that leaving is the only way to break the cycle (pg. 354). This moment represents a culmination of fear for her child's future, emotional exhaustion, and the desire for empowerment.

This decision reflects a psychological shift, where Lily moves from victimhood to a sense of agency. Theories of trauma and empowerment suggest that a critical turning point for abuse survivors is when they prioritize their own well-being or that of their loved ones. For Lily, her pregnancy becomes a catalyst for reclaiming her autonomy, as she acknowledges that staying in the relationship will only perpetuate the trauma.

Psychological Healing

Lily's path to psychological healing is gradual and complex. After leaving Ryle, she begins to rebuild her life, focusing on her mental recovery and emotional independence. However, healing is not immediate. Even after physically escaping the relationship, Lily continues to grapple with the emotional scars of the abuse. *"The hardest part of leaving was the fact that I loved him,"* she admits, showing that healing involves not only physical distance but also disentangling the emotional attachment (pg. 384).

By the end of the novel, Lily finds solace in her role as a mother, taking control of her life and choosing to end the cycle of abuse for her daughter's sake. This decision represents a moment of psychological liberation, where Lily fully accepts that leaving Ryle was the right choice. While she has made strides toward emotional recovery, the novel suggests that the scars of abuse are long-lasting, and full healing will take time. *"It ends with us,"* Lily declares to her newborn daughter, symbolizing her commitment to breaking the generational cycle of abuse (pg. 372).

Symbolism and Narrative Techniques

Symbolism of the Title

The title *It Ends with Us* carries profound symbolic weight. For Lily, the title represents her decision to end the cycle of abuse that began with her parents and continued with Ryle. She makes this clear when she declares to her daughter, *"It stops here. With me and you"* (pg. 372). The title reflects both the psychological toll of domestic violence and the strength required to prevent it from continuing across generations. It embodies the struggle for healing, as Lily must confront both her past and present to ensure a healthier future for herself and her child.

Narrative Perspective

Hoover's choice of first-person narrative, particularly through diary entries, enhances the psychological impact of the story. By allowing the reader direct access to Lily's thoughts and emotions, Hoover effectively illustrates the complexity of living with abuse. The diary entries, in particular, provide a raw and intimate portrayal of Lily's internal world.

"I'm trying so hard to figure out what love is supposed to be, and no one is making it easy" (pg. 158), she writes, revealing her confusion and emotional turmoil. The first-person perspective immerses the reader in Lily's psychological journey, making the impact of the abuse feel personal and immediate.

Conclusion

In *It Ends with Us*, Colleen Hoover delivers a profound exploration of the psychological toll of domestic abuse, highlighting the complex interplay of love, guilt, and fear that defines Lily Bloom's journey. Through her nuanced portrayal of Lily's internal struggles, the novel underscores the often-overlooked psychological scars left by abuse, illustrating that the impact extends far beyond physical violence. Hoover's depiction of Lily's emotional turmoil—marked by self-doubt, guilt, and cognitive dissonance—reveals how deeply embedded the cycles of abuse can become, affecting not only the victims but also their future generations.

This narrative not only illuminates the emotional battlefield that survivors navigate but also serves as a vital reminder of the necessity for empathy and understanding in conversations about domestic violence. The insights drawn from Lily's experiences emphasize the importance of recognizing the psychological aspects of abuse and the complexities of leaving an abusive relationship. It illustrates that the decision to break free from such relationships is not merely a matter of physical escape but involves a profound emotional and psychological transformation.

Furthermore, Hoover's powerful message that *"It Ends With Us"* resonates deeply, suggesting a hopeful path toward healing and empowerment for those trapped in the cycle of abuse. By breaking the silence and stigma surrounding domestic violence, *It Ends with Us* encourages readers to engage in meaningful discussions about mental health and the need for supportive resources for survivors.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the broader discourse on domestic abuse, advocating for greater awareness of its psychological ramifications. It calls for continued research and advocacy to ensure that the emotional scars of abuse are acknowledged and addressed, fostering a society where survivors can find healing, hope, and the strength to reclaim their narratives.

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