

# *The Emotionally Abusive Relationship*

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## *Verbal Assaults*

Verbal assault includes berating, belittling, criticizing, humiliating, name-calling, screaming, threatening, excessive blaming, shaming, using sarcasm in a cutting way, or expressing disgust toward the person. This kind of abuse is extremely damaging to a person's self-esteem and self-image. Just as assuredly as physical violence assaults the body, verbal abuse assaults the mind and spirit, causing wounds that are extremely difficult to heal. Yelling and screaming is not only demeaning but frightening as well. When someone yells at us, we become afraid that he or she may also resort to physical violence.

## *Abusive Expectations*

When you have abusive expectations, you place unreasonable demands on your partner. For example, expecting a partner to put aside everything in order to satisfy your needs, demanding a partner's undivided attention, demanding constant sex, or requiring a partner to spend all of his or her time with you are all examples of abusive expectations. A partner with abusive expectations can never be pleased because there is always something more you could have done. You are likely to be subjected to constant criticism and to be berated because you don't fulfill his or her needs.

## *Emotional Blackmail*

Emotional blackmail is one of the most powerful forms of manipulation. It occurs when one partner either consciously or unconsciously coerces the other into doing what he wants by playing on his partner's fear, guilt, or compassion. Examples of emotional blackmail include one partner threatening to end a relationship if he doesn't get what he wants and one partner rejecting or distancing herself from her partner until he gives in to her demands. If you partner withholds sex or affection or gives you the silent treatment or the cold shoulder whenever he is displeased with you, threatens to find someone else, or uses other fear tactics to get you under control, he is using the tactic of emotional blackmail.

## *Gaslighting*

The term comes from the classic movie *Gaslight*, in which a husband uses a variety of insidious techniques to make his wife doubt her perceptions, her memory, and her very sanity. A partner who does this may continually deny that certain events occurred or that he or she said something you both know was said, or he or she may insinuate that you are exaggerating or lying. In this way, the abusive person may be trying to gain control over you or to avoid taking responsibility for his or her actions. This is one of the forms of emotional abuse that is done very consciously and deliberately. It is sometimes used by those who need to discredit their partner in order to get access to his or her money, in order to turn others against him or her, or as a way

to justify their own inappropriate, cruel, or abusive behaviour. In the movie, the husband needed to make his wife and others to think she was insane in order to get access to her money.

### *Overt and Covert Abuse*

A pattern of emotional abuse occurs on both an overt and a covert level.

- **Overt emotional abuse** is openly demeaning.
- **Covert emotional abuse** is subtler than overt abuse, but no less devastating. When the wife gives her husband contemptuous looks when he tells her they can't afford something, when she offhandedly suggests that maybe some other man might buy it for her, she is being covertly abusive.

### *Intentional and Unintentional Abuse*

Many experts would add that another way of deciding if a behavior is emotionally abusive is whether or not it is intentional. In fact, when most clinicians refer to emotional abuse, they usually mean intentional abuse. While some partners deliberately use words, gestures, silence, or scare tactics to manipulate or control their partner, many do so without conscious intent. This is particularly true when one or both partners are repeating his or her parents' behavior.

***The Definition of emotional abuse includes any behavior or attitude that emotionally damages another person, regardless of whether there is conscious intent to do so.***

Many abusers are totally unaware that their attitude and/or behavior is abusive. This doesn't, however, make their behavior any less destructive or damaging to their partner or the relationship. Even those who are aware they are being abusive often do so in a desperate attempt to gain a feeling of control in their lives. Add to this the fact that we can all become emotionally abusive given the right circumstances, and we can see that emotional abusers are not necessarily horrible people at all. Most people who emotionally abuse others were themselves emotionally abused and are merely reenacting what was done to them. However, this doesn't make their actions, attitudes, or words hurt any less nor does it make them any less damaging.

Certainly, some people deliberately and maliciously set out to destroy their partner. But most people who emotionally abuse their partner do so either unconsciously or as a way of surviving the stress of an emotional relationship. When our first experiences of intimacy were fraught with fear, abandonment, humiliation, or smothering, we can't help but repeat these behaviors when we become adults and enter into intimate relationships. Most people initially felt love feelings for their partner; otherwise they wouldn't have chosen to be with him or her. But those love feelings can be destroyed by feelings of anger when our hopes are dashed, *when our partner fails to meet our expectations*, or when we come to feel rejected, betrayed, or abandoned by our partner.

To complicate things, sometimes we become emotionally abusive because we love our partners so much or because we are insecure. This is particularly true of those who "love too much" and those who tend to lose themselves in their relationships. Sometimes our love becomes distorted by our feelings of insecurity and our fear of abandonment. This is often the case with those who become overly controlling and overly smothering of their partner. Others become emotionally abusive because of their fear of intimacy.

Even intentional abuse is not always malicious. In the heat of passion we are all guilty of wanting to hurt our partner (OMG!! I don't know if I can agree to this.) If our partner has hurt us, we want him or her to hurt, too. We may deliberately say something hurtful even though we know the effect it will have. We may threaten to leave, knowing it will cause our partner to become insecure. Or we may give our partner the silent treatment or withhold affection or sex in the hope that he or she will suffer from our rejection. Although these are all forms of intentional emotional abuse, even the most loving person is guilty of these actions from time to time (really?!) Again, it does not become emotional abuse unless there is a clear and consistent pattern.

### *Malevolent Abuse*

There is another form of intentional abuse that is more insidious and far more damaging. I call this malevolent (lethal) abuse.

***Malevolent abuse is abuse that is not only intentional but deliberately undermining.***

It is when one partner is bent on undermining or even destroying the other, when one partner is so angry or envious or so full of hate that he deliberately and maliciously sets out to sabotage a partner's success, health, or happiness.

### *Personality Traits That Set One Up For Abuse*

- Strong desire to avoid confrontation.
- Tendency to pretend things are better than they are.
- Tendency to feel responsible for others.
- Tendency to blame oneself for problems in a relationship.
- Fear of being alone.
- Tendency to doubt oneself, including one's perceptions.
- Tendency to make excuses for another's behavior.
- Tendency to be naive about others and to believe that love makes one a better person.

### *Confront Your Partner on His or Her Abusive Behavior*

Role play these strategies with a friend or counselor before you try them with your partner, especially if you tend to become overwhelmed, frightened, or tongue-tied when he or she is being abusive. If you don't have someone with whom to practice, you can put an empty chair in front of you and imagine that your partner is sitting in it. This will help you get over some of your fears about confronting him or her and will make you more confident about what you want to say. The following suggestions will further prepare you for your confrontations:

- Be sure to speak clearly and firmly. Hold your head up high and look directly into your partner's eyes.
- Make sure your feet are firmly planted on the ground, whether you are standing or sitting.
- Take a deep breath before beginning your confrontation and make sure your eyes are clear and that you are in the present. (Often emotional or verbal abuse can trigger childhood memories and catapult you into the past.)

There are two ways to confront your partner:

1. **You can sit down with your partner and have a talk with him about the fact that he is being inappropriate or disrespectful toward you.** If you and your partner are still emotionally close a great deal of the time and are still able to communicate with one another over most issues, this approach --a serious discussion-- may be the best choice. This approach will be especially effective if you have not confronted him on his abusive behavior in the past.
2. **You can call him on his behavior or attitude the next time he is abusive.** If you have confronted him before and he has ignored you or insisted that you are making too much of it, then you may need to try this approach and confront him whenever he commits the abusive behavior. This is also the best approach for couples who have grown distant and non-communicative.

If you are in a relatively new relationship and have begun to see warning signs of emotional or verbal abuse, a serious discussion with your partner is probably the best approach. Many people are simply unaware that their behavior is abusive. If he is young or has little to no experience in a long-term relationship, he may simply be repeating one or both parents' behavior without being aware of how it affects his partner. Even if a person has been in previous relationships, their past partners may have put up with the abuse without saying anything or may have blamed themselves for their partner's behavior, never realizing that they were being abused.

(From a review of the book *"The Emotionally Abusive Relationship: How to Stop Being Abused and How to Stop Abusing"* by Beverly Engel.)