

What is emotional abuse?

Emotional abuse occurs when a person uses words, silence, or actions to threaten, belittle, or humiliate another person. The purpose is to instill fear or to intimidate; the goal is to control someone. Emotional abuse diminishes a person's self-esteem, which reinforces a feeling of helplessness. If a person feels helpless, he or she is also more likely to feel dependent. When the one victimized becomes dependent in the relationship, the person perpetrating the abuse gains more power.

Who might be victimized?

Emotional abuse exists among every ethnic group, religious group, socio-economic class, and educational level. Children, teenagers, adults, and seniors can be victimized.

Who might perpetrate abuse?

Typically, the person who abuses is a parent, spouse, adult child, dating partner, or friend. Emotional abuse is a chronic and repetitive pattern of interaction found in an ongoing relationship.

What are examples of emotional abuse?

Examples include cursing, excessive teasing, derogatory or harsh words. It may include verbal threats to harm the person or a valued possession. It includes threatening actions like waving a gun. Some actions intend to humiliate—for example, sending a child to school wearing a diaper because he wet the bed.

Here are additional examples of emotional abuse:

"I wish you hadn't been born."

"You didn't make your bed so I threw out your stuffed animals."

"You're worthless—no one else would marry you."

"If you love me, you'll have sex with me."

"If you leave me, I'll get custody of the children."

"You're crazy, and people will believe me when I tell them that."

- Places a gun on the kitchen table as a reminder to serve dinner on time
- Takes a senior citizen's medication bottles and leaves half of the amount prescribed
- Rips up a dress claiming she used it to attract men
- Leaves a dead animal in the house to show what will happen if the partner leaves
- Drives dangerously or recklessly to coerce a partner to agree with a decision
- Goes through the waste basket daily, looking for evidence the partner is having an affair
- Parent runs over the family dog in front of his son because he did not receive A's on his report card

What part does power and control play?

The person who intentionally and repeatedly threatens or says harsh words wants to wear the other person down. Once worn down, the person who is victimized hopes to avoid hearing the threats or nasty words again by doing what is asked. The result of emotional abuse is gaining power and control over another person.

How does power and control affect the person who perpetrates abuse?

A person's self-esteem depends on many things, including a sense of importance. This includes the belief that he or she is important to others. Those who choose to abuse believe they gain importance when they control another person. (Remember the connection between dependency of the one victimized and the power of the one who abuses.) This seems logical to the one who perpetrates abuse, but in reality, it's not! To believe that self-esteem grows by controlling or harming another person is a distorted thought. It's irrational to think you are more important by controlling someone to the point of diminishing that person's self-esteem. Abusive behavior is difficult to stop when it becomes associated with an irrational, distorted, false sense of greater self-esteem. At the same time, the person who abuses may also experience feelings of shame and contempt for how he or she behaves. Disturbingly, he or she believes the one being victimized is to blame for the harmful behavior. For example, "If she would come home on time, I wouldn't suspect her of having an affair." In the eyes of the one who abuses, the person victimized becomes the cause of the controlling behavior as well as the feelings of shame and contempt. To punish the person for causing this mess, the one perpetrating the abuse verbally lashes out again—at the one victimized.

Soon this becomes a vicious cycle. The one victimized, to avoid more abuse, becomes compliant to the demands of the one perpetrating the abuse. But the emotional abuse does not stop. Compliant behavior actually contributes to the

abuser's feeling of shame, and then the feeling of shame provokes another round of verbal assault. Emotional abuse is difficult to understand. You cannot make sense of it. Those victimized by it find it hard to explain emotional abuse to someone else. Some say, "If only I had a bruise to show you."

How does emotional abuse differ from criticism?

One difference is the chronic, repetitive pattern of threats or harsh words. Also, people who are critical tend not to hide or disguise their conduct like an abusive person might choose to do. Criticism, unfortunately, can come from any direction, but emotional abuse comes from a trusted person or intimate, and that makes abusive comments more difficult to deflect. In non-abusive relationships, the person criticized may have an opportunity to respond without fear of retribution, but an abusive person will not tolerate someone who defends himself or herself.

Criticism tends to be brief, although it is hurtful at the time. The person who criticizes may offer an apology that helps restore the other person and the relationship. The one who abuses may apologize too, but the person victimized learns over time that the apology is manipulative. People who experience criticism feel stung by the harsh things said to them. However, the harm from a chronic pattern of humiliating, belittling, and threatening comments surpasses that which comes from criticism.

Why is the "silent treatment" so bad?

It is described as a "mind game" that controls people. When a parent, spouse, or friend keeps silent, the other person keeps guessing "What's the matter?" or "What did I do?" The silent treatment may last several days and sometimes weeks. The one victimized by it gives power to the silent one by pleading for the silence to end. The silence might disappear as quickly as it came. There may or may not be an explanation—it probably wouldn't make sense anyway—but silence typically ends with the cryptic comment, "You know what you did."

Because the one victimized does not know what he or she did, he or she feels frustrated and confused. "How can I change if I don't know what I did?" The frustration is never expressed because he or she has learned that such expressions might provoke a longer silence the next time or spark an aggressive verbal attack.

Living with someone who uses silence is like walking on eggshells. The tension in the home and relationship becomes unbearable.

What are the effects of emotional abuse?

People worn down by humiliating actions or comments, by intimidating threats, or by the silent treatment describe this experience as a betrayal of their trust. The primary effect in the future may be their reluctance to trust others. Emotional abuse diminishes self-esteem. Consequently, those victimized by it have difficulty succeeding in other areas of their life where trust and self-confidence are necessary.

Other manifestations of emotional abuse include anxiety, depression, anger, suicide, chemical dependency, and eating disorders. The combination of helplessness and dependency leads some people to become co-dependent.

Codependent people focus on pleasing others while not allowing anyone to care for them. These dynamics cause the co-dependent person to become angry and resentful.

Emotional abuse also leaves a person feeling stripped of the ability to master his or her own emotions. The person who has been victimized becomes uncertain how to express emotions and how to interpret others' emotions. Many do not feel comfortable with a full range of emotion.

How prevalent is emotional abuse?

Emotional abuse occurs alone or along with physical or sexual abuse. Therefore, it occurs more frequently than other forms of abuse. And it continues for long periods of time. For example, emotional abuse by a parent can begin in childhood and continue even after the child reaches adulthood.

Are there signs a person was emotionally abused?

A person who has been victimized tries hard to hide the effects of emotional abuse, but here are a few signs:

- Isolates self from family or friends
- Cringes when others yell or get angry
- Avoids disagreements and acts compliant
- Rationalizes a partner's bad attitude toward him or her

- Reminds others he or she isn't very good at doing most things
- Acts fearful around the person who perpetrates the abuse, hyper vigilant
- Asks others not to disclose mistakes to parent or spouse

Can you report emotional abuse?

Yes. Provinces and states have enacted laws to protect minors and vulnerable adults from abuse. Under these laws, emotional abuse may be referred to as emotional maltreatment or mental injury. Repeated verbal threats to harm a minor or vulnerable adult are even reportable as a form of physical abuse. It is difficult for civil authorities to respond to complaints of emotional abuse. There is no precise measurement of how often threats must occur or how severe the language must be before it is considered abuse.

Why isn't emotional abuse reported?

Besides the lack of a precise measurement, other people do not often witness or hear emotional abuse. Unless a person is directly affected, it is hard to imagine how awful it can be. Further, when a person discloses emotional abuse, people may think it is not serious because there are no bruises or injuries. Others deny that talking to children, a spouse, or seniors in an abusive fashion will actually hurt them. They might remember a similar incident in their own life and rationalize, "People get over that." What can civil authorities do? They may investigate for other signs of abuse. If the authorities substantiate a report of emotional abuse, they usually recommend parenting classes or counseling for members of the family.

What can we do?

- Acknowledge that emotional abuse is harmful to a person of any age.
- Avoid rationalizing that the abusive person just had a bad day.
- Avoid minimizing the issue: “That’s not such a bad word” or “Forget about it.”
- Do not directly confront the abusive person because you could make the situation worse. Instead, call civil authorities or a counselor for advice.
- In some instances, the one victimized may need to consider leaving the situation or obtaining a restraining (peace) order.
- Report what you observe or hear to a caregiver (for example, a nursing facility supervisor).
- Continue contact with the child or adult to monitor the situation.
- Take threats of physical harm seriously.
- Encourage those who are victimized to seek out other adults for support.
- Encourage the non-offending parent to take emotional abuse seriously and advocate for a child to receive counseling.

Why doesn't the person who experiences abuse confront the one who has perpetrated it?

Abusive people are intimidating and manipulative whether they use their hands or their mouths. These same people appear charming and personable in other settings, which gives the people victimized by them a sense of hope (“Things will get better”) as well as despair (“Who will believe how I’m treated at home?”). Those who perpetrate abuse also tend to isolate those that they victimize. Isolation makes it difficult to seek help. And

because emotional abuse is not well understood, those victimized by it are likely to blame themselves or to try working it out rather than to seek help.

If I was abused, will I abuse others?

No matter how unpleasant their experience of emotional abuse, some of those who have been victimized do become abusive themselves. It is difficult not to practice a behavior that you experienced over and over again, it becomes learned behavior. If a person felt powerless for many years, he or she might feel very tempted to restore power by controlling someone else. If you were emotionally abused or are in an abusive relationship now, you need to seek help. With counseling and strong support, a person can overcome the negative effects of emotional abuse.

Are you saying I cannot say a harsh word or get angry with my child or spouse?

No, but you need to be aware of your motives as well as how often you say harsh things to a child, spouse, or elderly parent. Threats to harm a person or a person's property are never acceptable.

- When angry, do you feel better after saying cruel things?
- Do you say cruel things to the same person even when you are not angry with him or her?
- Do you feel out of control while verbally lashing out at someone?
- After lashing out, do you feel relief without remorse?
- Do you think your child or spouse deserves to be humiliated or threatened?
- Do you feel ashamed but unable to apologize or stop the next outburst?

If you answered yes to one or more of these questions, you should discuss your behavior with a counselor.

If I am being victimized by emotional abuse, what should I do?

- Tell someone what is happening to you.
- Recognize that the abuse is not your fault.
- Try to see yourself as others do—not as the one who is abusing you does.
- If you attend school, seek out support from a teacher or school counselor.
- Stay in touch with friends and family members who reinforce a positive image of you.
- Find a safer environment if threats increase or if you fear for your safety or wellbeing.
- Report threats or abuse for yourself or someone else living in a care facility.

If I am perpetrating abuse, what should I do?

- Stop the abusive behavior now.
- Seek out a competent therapist or specialized group intervention to help you stop the abuse.
- Recognize that you need to change both your attitude and your behavior, and that it will be a long process of unlearning old patterns and learning a better way.
- If you won't stop the abuse, leave the situation to remove the threat of re-offending.

What should the church do?

- Declare that emotional abuse is harmful to God's people and that it violates God's intentions for our relationships with one another.

- Acknowledge that emotional abuse occurs and should not be kept a secret.
- Recognize that children, adults, or seniors need advocates to speak out against emotional abuse and/or arrange for their protection.
- Take emotional abuse seriously. Use spiritual authority to speak out against abuse and call those who perpetrate abuse to confession and repentance.

What does the Bible say about emotional abuse?

Jesus teaches us that the first and greatest commandment is to love God, and the second one is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39). Treat loved ones as you would treat yourself.

The Bible also points to God's displeasure with those who hurt or destroy his creation.

The following verses help us understand God's intentions for our relationships with others:

- James 1:19-26
- James 3:1-6
- James 4:1-3
- Matthew 18:1-9
- Matthew 19:13-15
- Ephesians 4:25-32
- Ephesians 5:1-7, 21-26, 28-33

