

Emotional Abuse

What is Emotional Abuse?

Emotional abuse is any behaviour designed to control or humiliate a person through fear or verbal or physical assaults. It includes intimidation, manipulation and refusing ever to be pleased. Emotional abuse is to intentionally hurts another person's feelings. When we form emotional bonds, we expect the other person to care how we feel. When this does not happen, we feel hurt.

Emotional abuse is not just about what we do, but also what we don't do. Relationships flourish only if both partners actively contribute. This means showing affection to each other, listening to each other and taking each other's needs and preferences into account. It must be done by both parties. If emotional abuse occurs and then stops, the abused should not become the abuser by not contributing to the relationship. This can start a downward spiral and more serious problems.

Emotional abuse takes into account context, words and behaviour. All are relevant to whether what occurs is abuse. Abusers have an intention to harm the other person by what they do or don't do. If an action by its nature is abusive but unintended, and the person is made aware that what they are doing is abusive or unfair and they continue to do it, then they are guilty of intentional abuse.

Relationships are emotionally abusive when the abuse is constant and habitual. Most cases (though not all), of emotional abuse occur in partner relationships. For emotional abuse occurring in a workplace, see [Workplace Bullying](#).

Common Examples of Emotional Abuse

Humiliating: making fun, excessive teasing, sarcasm, ridiculing, disregarding thoughts, opinions and feelings. Always 'being right' and the other 'always wrong.'

Dominating: treating an adult like a child or as inferior, chastising, making them get permission for small decisions, exercising unreasonable control over spending, giving excessive criticism, belittling, talking over, shouting over, making all the decisions, and preventing any independence.

Accusing: blaming, making untrue accusations, cannot laugh at themselves, being overly sensitive to criticism, making fun of someone, blaming others for their 'mistakes,' name-calling, disrespecting valid requests, or cannot apologise when he/she ought to.

Emotional distancing: silent treatment, tone of voice, isolation, emotional neglect, withholding attention or affection, failure to meet needs as a form of punishment, playing the victim instead of taking responsibility for own actions and attitudes, withholding empathy, refusing to listen, not responding, not facing, or cutting the other off.

Body Language: rolling eyes, sighs, grimaces, disgusted looks, cold shoulder, banging dishes, slamming doors, shutting eyes, refusing to look, and walking away.

Safety First

If you are suffering emotional abuse, your safety comes first. If not managed and nipped in the bud, emotional abuse can turn into physical abuse. **If you are in danger**, in need of help or to talk to someone, call the [National Domestic Violence Hotline on 1-800-799-7233](#).

They have trained staff, ready to respond to your call 24-hours a day, 7-days a week, every day in the year. Support is confidential, and can involve immediate crisis intervention. See their website at: <http://www.thehotline.org> for more details. Don't stay unsafe when help is at hand.

Managing Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse can render a person's thinking chaotic. Have a step-by-step management plan. The dynamics and history of your relationship will determine what you do. These are general guidelines:

1. Be aware that **no behaviour or situation** justifies abuse, emotional, physical or other.
2. Always safety first. Get help if you need it. Don't wait until it's too late.
3. Be aware that you can only change your own behaviour, not your partner's. You can try to negotiate or even demand changes, but in the end, it is up to him or her to respond.
4. Decide what behaviours are abusive and which are not. Be clear in your own mind about this.
5. Tell your partner what behaviour is and is not acceptable. Name the offending actions so there is no misunderstanding. Speak calmly and positively. Do this when abuse is not occurring. You are more likely to get a responsive ear when things are quiet and the relationship is working.
6. If your partner responds favourably, discuss together the guidelines for behaviour towards each other. Make a clear, unambiguous agreement including 'penalties' for breaches. Discuss what help might be needed to 'mend' things so that the right kind of changes can be made. If you get cooperation, put your energies into improving the relationship so that abuse no longer 'fits.' For additional help, talk to supportive friends and family and consider Couples Counselling.
7. While it does not justify the abuse in any way, understanding what is behind it can be helpful. Abusers are in some way not coping with a relationship in a normal, healthy way. They may be insecure, have poor self-esteem, inadequate emotional control and self-management skills, and any one of a number of other problems, including drug abuse or other addictions.
8. If there is a problem that is a key causal factor, such as an addiction, encourage your partner to seek help. Be supportive and patient as long as you can see improvement happening.
9. Encourage your partner to open up more emotionally. Often, bottled up emotions are factors in abuse. Be a role-model by expressing your own feelings frankly. Respond sensitively when he or she does open up. Try to put the relationship on a new, positive footing, where emotional abuse is just not part of what happens any more. Suggest Couples Counselling if there are differences you want to solve.
10. If you do not get a favourable response (5 above), you know then that you will have to manage the situation alone. Many 'abusers' are unreasonable – after all, they are engaging in unreasonable behaviour - and so do not be surprised if you do not get cooperation. At least you have tried.
11. Decide what your 'deal breaker' will be and let your partner know. Also decide what you will do if the deal breaker occurs, and stick to it. You may decide it means leaving the relationship. It is in your hands how far you are prepared to go.

But you do not and should not have to endure emotional or any other kind of abuse to stay in a relationship. If you do, consider whether the relationship is actually worth having. Individual counselling may help you at this point.

12. If you would like help managing the effects of emotional abuse, contact us below.

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