




Emotional Abuse

WHAT IS EMOTIONAL ABUSE?

Emotional (or psychological) abuse in intimate relationships is a serious problem. Some examples of emotional abuse include name-calling, criticisms and put-downs. Stereotyped beliefs, myths and behavior about sex roles for women and men, and about what true love is, are often at the root of emotionally abusive behavior. Women and men in our culture are often socialized to believe that women should be accommodating, care for others even at the expense of themselves, and to please men. Women and men are also socialized to believe that it is men's job to protect women, to be in control at all times, and to "call the shots". Further, many young women and men believe that they must be in a relationship to be whole. They believe that they should devote themselves totally to their partner, often to the exclusion of other relationships and interests. Jealousy, possessiveness and sometimes abuse, is seen as a sign of true love. Believing that any relationship, even an abusive one, is better than no relationship at all, leaves individuals without the support that they need to leave an unhealthy relationship.

When a relationship begins, the individuals often feel connected and committed to each other. Usually, there is little tension and few disagreements. Neither can imagine problems in the relationship. This is a very reinforcing stage in the relationship. Emotional abuse tends to develop gradually over time and because the couple feel so connected, they may minimize the significance and impact of emotionally abusive behavior. However, emotional abuse is about power and control, not about respect and love.

- **Isolation:** exerting control over what a partner does, where s/he goes, who s/he spends time with, or who s/he talks to.
- **Verbal:** sarcasm; teasing; swearing; interrupting; muttering; put downs; name-calling; mimicking; ridiculing in the presence of others; treating like a child; purposefully breaking promises; twisting reality (i.e., making the partner feel like s/he is crazy); threatening to hurt the partner/loved one/pet; threatening to take the children/or using them to get at the partner.
- **Using self:** threats of suicide; sulking; silent treatment; withdrawing affection or sex; unwillingness to resolve conflict; storming out.
- **Intimidation:** instilling fear by using looks, gestures, tone of voice; yelling; smashing or destroying things; driving recklessly.
- **Blaming:** not taking responsibility for his/her own actions, words and/or feelings.
- **Abusing male privilege:** telling a female partner that "women are all the same"; degrading her based on her gender; acting like "the king of the castle"; treating her like a slave.



Emotional abuse is the foundation of all types of abuse, including physical and sexual abuse. A Canadian university study found that 70% of men acknowledged that they had been psychologically abusive in a dating relationship at least once in the past year.

DeKeseredy, W. & Schwartz, M. (1998). *Woman Abuse on Campus: Results From the Canadian National Survey*. London: Sage.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF EMOTIONAL ABUSE?

Emotional abuse impacts people in very subtle ways. Over time, it may:

- erode self-esteem and confidence
- damage one's sense of hopefulness about life
- damage the ability to trust self and others
- impair one's ability to be assertive
- increase feelings of fearfulness, anxiety and depression
- shatters beliefs that the world is a good and safe place
- result in nightmares and vivid memories of being abused
- lead to social withdrawal, isolation and loneliness
- decrease one's ability to take care of oneself
- impair one's ability to maintain satisfying relationships with others
- leaves one vulnerable to further abuse
- leaves one more vulnerable to becoming abusive

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I AM IN AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP?

- Trust your instincts.
- Be true to yourself.
- Talk to people you trust. Maintain your supportive relationships with others and accept their help.
- If you know you are being abused, are being abusive, or have questions about whether there may be abuse in your relationship, see a counsellor.

WHERE CAN I GET HELP?

Student Counselling Services
(966-4920)

Student Health Services
(966-5768)

- **Controlling resources, time and space:** making a partner ask for money; preventing a partner from holding down a job; taking money; withholding information; denying the use of the car; not allowing a partner privacy or quiet time; interrupting a partner's daily schedule (e.g., meals, sleep time, attending to commitments outside of the relationship).
- **Physical abuse:** slapping; kicking; punching; shoving; shaking; pushing; pulling; pinching; stabbing; dragging; hitting with hands or objects; biting; scratching; burning; forced sex or sexual touching; restraining.
- **Sexual abuse:** any unwanted sexual contact ranging from non-accidental touching to forced intercourse; someone touching or looking at your sexual parts without your consent; being forced to look at or touch the sexual parts of another person's body; being forced to view or participate in pornographic activities.

THE CYCLE OF EMOTIONAL ABUSE

Emotional abuse often follows a predictable pattern, where the exertion of power and control intensifies over time. Typically the cycle begins with a honeymoon phase characterized by loving and harmonious times together. The individual who is abusive often initially dotes on his/her partner by buying gifts, providing excessive compliments and making repeated statements about the importance of the relationship. This phase is generally followed by a period of building tension in which the abusive individual begins to criticize, make accusations, and display excessive jealousy. Eventually the controlling behavior of this phase becomes more intense and severe, often resulting in degradation and humiliation. The abused partner often feels worthless and responsible and may attempt to calm the partner and anticipate his/her next actions. It is common for the individual who is abused to deny the significance of what is happening and to feel ambivalent about whether to end the relationship. People may encourage the abused individual to stay in the relationship, which can lead to more confusion.

Following the abusive episode, the abusive individual often exhibits remorsefulness and apologizes excessively for the abuse. The abuser typically behaves in caring ways and promises to cease the abuse. This creates a false sense of hope that the abuse will not recur. Again, the partner who is abused feels responsible for helping to make the relationship work, so continues to modify his/her behavior with the hope of de-escalating or preventing his abuse. The abused partner is most vulnerable at this time in the cycle. The attentiveness and promises are comforting and make it difficult to realize the full impact of the abuse. Over time, tension builds, promises are replaced by threats and the abuse escalates again.

Understanding abuse is the first step toward leaving an abusive partner, getting help for your own abusive behavior, or helping someone who is being abused.

Emotional abuse is ALWAYS the abuser's responsibility; s/he always has the choice to behave in respectful and nonviolent ways.

Abuse is NEVER the result of anything the abused individual has said or done.