

Understanding Emotional Abuse

■ by Kelsee Costanza, MS, LPC



In contrast to the injuries of physical abuse, the impact of emotional abuse is often invisible, as it leaves marks on the mind. Because we cannot always “see” it, emotional abuse is prone to misunderstanding and may not be easily recognizable.

What is emotional abuse?

Emotional abuse is a pattern of ongoing abusive behaviors, with the intention of controlling and manipulating another person while diminishing the person's self-worth, identity, and dignity. Emotional abuse can occur within any interpersonal relationship, i.e., romantic partners, family members, friends, and colleagues.

Emotionally abusive behaviors can involve the following:

- **Gaslighting** - a form of manipulation in which a person causes you to question your reality, memory, and/or perceptions.
- **Stonewalling** – refusal to communicate with you, e.g., “the silent treatment,” or offering only evasive responses.
- **Minimizing or discounting** - downplaying or trivializing the significance of your thoughts, feelings, or experiences.
- **Isolation and control** - preventing you from: seeing or talking to friends and family, engaging in recreational activities, going to work/school, or seeing a doctor or therapist; limiting what you: watch, read, wear, buy, etc.
- **Insults** - intentionally saying things that are meant to hurt you or someone you love.
- **Humiliation** - using words or actions, typically in public, that cause you to feel ashamed, stupid, or devalued, e.g., making fun of you or treating you like a servant.
- **Intimidation** - includes anything that causes you to feel afraid, e.g., threatening divorce, threatening injury to you or someone else, threatening suicide, hurting a pet, displaying weapons, stalking.
- **Coercion** - persuading you, by force or by threats, to do something that you do not want to do.
- **Blaming** - making you think that you are at fault for their abusive behavior.
- **Jealousy** - using jealousy to justify behavior, e.g., accusing you of flirting with others or having affairs, or questioning paternity of your child(ren).
- **Verbal aggression** - frequently yelling or swearing at you.

In addition to the above behaviors, you may also consider the questions: Do you often feel like you are “walking on eggshells” to manage the other person's mood? Are you often the one apologizing, even when you are not in the wrong? How do you feel when you interact with the person - do you feel scared, frustrated, confused, anxious?

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What is the impact of emotional abuse?

There are both immediate and long-term impacts of emotional abuse.

People who have experienced abuse often blame themselves for not recognizing the abuse sooner, for not leaving the relationship, and for allowing themselves to be treated in such a way. However, it is, unequivocally, not their fault. Abuse involves “trauma bonding,” which is a state of being emotionally attached to the abuser. The abuser engages in a cycle of abuse, which involves a “honeymoon period” following an abusive incident, and the kind and loving behaviors of the honeymoon period trap the person in the relationship because they offer an elusive promise or hope that things will improve.



The blame described above can lead to feelings of shame, loneliness, and confusion. Someone experiencing emotional abuse may also feel fear, hopelessness, worthlessness, anxiety, and depression. He/She may also have difficulty trusting in other interpersonal relationships. In addition to these emotional consequences, a person experiencing abuse may feel physiological symptoms such as difficulty concentrating, muscle tension, headaches, gastrointestinal issues, and sleep issues.

Children who experience emotional abuse are more likely to develop certain chronic health issues than people who have not experienced abuse. These health issues include eating disorders, obesity, heart disease, headaches, substance use disorders, and mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD.

What does the Bible say about emotional abuse?

God does not condone any type of abuse. While “emotional abuse” is not a term you will find in the Bible, the Bible does provide a framework for what loving relationships look like.

1 Corinthians 13 offers us a picture of what love is and what love is not, and love “does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs” (v. 5); rather, love is patient and kind (v. 4). We are also called to love others as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:39), and to not curse those who have been made in the image of God (James 3:9-12).

Within marriage relationships, we can look to Ephesians 5:22-33, which illustrates that a marriage relationship is designed to reflect Jesus’s relationship to the church, a relationship founded on sacrificial love. Wives are called to submit to their husbands, and this submission is done with the understanding that the husbands are also loving their wives “just as Christ loved the church” (Eph. 5:25).

If you have experienced emotional abuse, know that it is not your fault and that there is hope and help. For immediate support, The National Domestic Violence Hotline is available at 1-800-799-7233. For long-term support, reach out to a therapist in your area. ■

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