

How to Identify and Cope With Emotional Abuse

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Feeling insulted and wounded. Never measuring up. Walking on eggshells. If these statements describe your relationship, it is likely you are being emotionally abused. In general, a relationship is emotionally abusive when there is a consistent pattern of abusive words and bullying behaviors that wear down a person's self-esteem and undermine their mental health. What's more, mental or emotional abuse, while most common in dating and married relationships, can occur in any relationship including among friends, family members, and coworkers.

Emotional abuse is one of the hardest forms of abuse to recognize. It can be subtle and insidious or overt and manipulative. Either way, it chips away at the victim's self-esteem and they begin to doubt their perceptions and reality.

The underlying goal in emotional abuse is to control the victim by discrediting, isolating, and silencing.

In the end, the victim feels trapped. They are often too wounded to endure the relationship any longer, but also too afraid to leave. So the cycle just repeats itself until something is done.

Impact of Emotional Abuse

When emotional abuse is severe and ongoing, a victim may lose their entire sense of self, sometimes without a single mark or bruise. Instead, the wounds are invisible to

others, hidden in the self-doubt, worthlessness and self-loathing the victim feels. In fact, many victims say that the scars from emotional abuse last far longer and are much deeper than those from physical abuse.

Over time, the accusations, verbal abuse, name-calling, criticisms, and gaslighting erode a victim's sense of self so much that they can no longer see themselves realistically. Consequently, the victim begins to agree with the abuser and becomes internally critical. Once this happens, most victims become trapped in the abusive relationship believing that they will never be good enough for anyone else.

Emotional abuse can even impact friendships because emotionally abused people often worry about how people truly see them and if they truly like them. Eventually, victims will pull back from friendships and isolate themselves, convinced that no one likes them. What's more, emotional abuse can cause a number of health problems including everything from depression and anxiety to stomach ulcers, heart palpitations, eating disorders, and insomnia.

How to Spot Emotional Abuse

When examining your own relationship, remember that emotional abuse is often subtle. As a result, it can be very hard to detect. If you are having trouble discerning whether or not your relationship is abusive, stop and think about how the interactions with your partner, friend or family member make you feel. If you feel wounded, frustrated, confused, misunderstood, depressed, anxious or worthless any time you interact, chances are high that your relationship is emotionally abusive.

Here are signs that you may be in an emotionally abusive relationship. Keep in mind, even if your partner only does a handful of these things, you are still in an emotionally abusive relationship. Do not fall into the trap of telling yourself "it's not that bad" and minimizing their behavior. Remember, everyone deserves to be treated with kindness and respect.

Emotionally abusive people display unrealistic expectations. Some examples include:

- Making unreasonable demands of you
- Expecting you to put everything aside and meet their needs
- Demanding you spend all of your time together
- Being dissatisfied no matter how hard you try or how much you give
- Criticizing you for not completing tasks according to their standards

- Expecting you to share their opinions (you are not permitted to have a different opinion)
- Demanding that you name exact dates and times when discussing things that upset you (when you cannot do this, they dismisses the event as if it never happened)

Emotionally abusive people invalidate you. Some examples include:

- Undermining, dismissing, or distorting your perceptions or your reality
- Refusing to accept your feelings by trying to define how you should feel
- Requiring you to explain and explain and explain how you feel
- Accusing you of being "too sensitive," "too emotional," or "crazy"
- Refusing to acknowledge or accept your opinions or ideas as valid
- Dismissing your requests, wants, and needs as ridiculous or unmerited
- Suggesting that your perceptions are wrong or that you cannot be trusted by saying things like "you're blowing this out of proportion" or "you exaggerate"
- Accusing you of being selfish, needy or materialistic if you express your wants or needs (the expectation is that you should not have any wants or needs)

Emotionally abusive people create chaos. Some examples include:

- Starting arguments for the sake of arguing
- Making confusing and contradictory statements (sometimes called "crazy-making")
- Having drastic mood changes or sudden emotional outbursts
- Nitpicking at your clothes, your hair, your work, and more
- Behaving so erratically and unpredictably that you feel like you are "walking on eggshells"

Emotionally abusive people use emotional blackmail. Some examples include:

- Manipulating and controlling you by making you feel guilty
- Humiliating you in public or in private
- Using your fears, values, compassion or other hot buttons to control you or the situation

- Exaggerating your flaws or pointing them out in order to deflect attention or to avoid taking responsibility for their poor choices or mistakes
- Denying that an event took place or lying about it
- Punishing you by withholding affection

Emotionally abusive people act superior and entitled. Some examples include:

- Treating you like you are inferior
- Blaming you for their mistakes and shortcomings
- Doubting everything you say and attempting to prove you wrong
- Making jokes at your expense
- Telling you that your opinions, ideas, values and thoughts are stupid, illogical or "do not make sense"
- Talking down to you or being condescending
- Using sarcasm when interacting with you
- Acting like they are always right, knows what is best and is smarter

Emotionally abusive people attempt to isolate and control you. Some examples include:

- Controlling who you see or spend time with including time with friends and family
- Monitoring your phone calls, text messages, social media, and email
- Accusing you of cheating and being jealous of outside relationships
- Taking or hiding your car keys
- Demanding to know where you are at all times or using GPS to track your every move
- Treating you like a possession or property
- Criticizing or making fun of your friends, family, and coworkers
- Using jealousy and envy as a sign of love and to keep you from being with others
- Coercing you into spending all of your time together
- Controlling the finances

If you suspect your partner, family member or friend may be emotionally abusing you, contact a counselor, an advocate or a pastor for assistance. You also can call the National Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-799-SAFE(7233) or visit their website thehotline.org and chat online with someone right away.

7 Ways to Deal With Emotional Abuse

The first step in dealing with an emotionally abusive relationship is to recognize that it is happening. If you were able to identify any aspect of emotional abuse in your relationship, it is important to acknowledge that first and foremost. By being honest about what you are experiencing, you can begin to take control of your life again. Here are seven more strategies for reclaiming your life that you can put into practice today.

Make your mental and physical health a priority. Stop worrying about pleasing the person abusing you. Take care of your needs. Do something that will help you think positive and affirm who you are. Also, be sure to get an appropriate amount of rest and eat healthy meals. These simple self-care steps can go a long way in helping you deal with the day-to-day stresses of emotional abuse.

Establish boundaries with the abuser. Firmly tell the abusive person that they may no longer yell at you, call you names, insult you, be rude to you, and so on. Then, tell them what will happen if they choose to engage in this behavior. For instance, tell them that if they call you names or insult you, the conversation will be over and you will leave the room. The key is to follow through on your boundaries. Do not communicate boundaries that you have no intention of keeping.

Stop blaming yourself. If you have been in an emotionally abusive relationship for any amount of time, you may believe that there is something severely wrong with you. Why else would someone who says they love you act like this, right? But you are not the problem. Abuse is a choice. So stop blaming yourself for something you have no control over.

Realize that you cannot "fix" the abusive person. Despite your best efforts, you will never be able to change an emotionally abusive person by doing something different or by being different. An abusive person makes a choice to behave abusively. Remind yourself that you cannot control their actions and that you are not to blame for their choices. The only thing you can fix or control is your response.

Do not engage with an abusive person. In other words, if an abuser tries to start an argument with you, begins insulting you, demands things from you or rages with

jealousy, do not try to make explanations, soothe their feelings or make apologies for things you did not do. Simply walk away from the situation if you can. Engaging with an abuser only sets you up for more abuse and heartache. No matter how hard you try, you will not be able to make things right in their eyes.

Build a support network. Stop being silent about the abuse you are experiencing. Talk to a trusted friend, family member or even a counselor about what you are experiencing. Take time away from the abusive person as much as possible and spend time with people who love and support you. This network of healthy friends and confidantes will help you feel less lonely and isolated. They also can speak truth into your life and help you put things into perspective.

Work on an exit plan. If your partner, friend, or family member has no intention of changing or working on their poor choices, you will not be able to remain in the abusive relationship forever. It will eventually take a toll on you both mentally and physically. Depending on your situation, you may need to take steps to end the relationship. Each situation is different. So it is best to discuss your thoughts and ideas with a trusted friend, family member or counselor.

Sources:

"Forms of Abuse," National Network to End Domestic Violence, <https://nnedv.org/content/forms-of-abuse/>

"Is This Abuse?" The National Domestic Violence Hotline, <http://www.thehotline.org/is-this-abuse/abuse-defined/>