

What Is Emotional Abuse?

Emotional abuse is a way to control another person by using emotions for example criticising, embarrassing, shaming and blaming, or otherwise manipulate another person. In general, a relationship is emotionally abusive when there is a consistent pattern of abusive words and bullying behaviours that wear down a person's self-esteem and undermine their mental health. Emotional abuse, while most common in dating and married relationships, can occur in any relationship including among friends, family members, and work colleagues.

Emotional abuse is one of the hardest forms of abuse to recognise. It can be subtle and stealthy or obvious and manipulative. The person's self-esteem can be chipped away and they begin to doubt their perceptions and reality. The underlying goal of emotional abuse is to control the person by discrediting, isolating, and silencing. In the end, the person feels trapped. They often feel they cannot cope, but are too afraid to leave.

How Do You Know?

When thinking about your own relationship, remember that emotional abuse is often so descreet can be very hard to detect. If you are having trouble working out whether or not your relationship is abusive, stop and think about how the interactions with your partner, friend, or family member make you feel.

Here are signs that you may be in an emotionally abusive relationship. Keep in mind that 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 minimising their behaviour. Remember: Everyone deserves to be treated with kindness and respect.

If you often feel hurt, frustrated, confused, misunderstood, depressed, anxious, or worthless when you interact, chances are high that your relationship is emotionally abusive.

Emotionally abusive people may have 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
- Criticising you for not completing tasks according to their standard
- Expecting you to share their opinions (i.e. not permitted your own)
- Demanding that you name exact dates and times when discussing things that upset you (and when you cannot do this, they may dismiss the event as if it never happened)

Emotionally abusive people undermine you. Some examples include:

- Dismissing, or distorting your perceptions or your reality
- Refusing to accept your feelings by trying to tell you how you should feel
- Requiring you to explain how you feel over and over
- Accusing you of being "too sensitive," "too emotional," or "crazy/mad"
- Refusing to acknowledge or accept your opinions or ideas as valid
- Dismissing your requests, wants, and needs as ridiculous or undeserved
- 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"

Emotionally abusive people create upset. Some examples include:

- Starting arguments for the sake of arguing
- Making confusing and contradictory statements
- Having drastic mood changes or sudden emotional outbursts
- Nit-picking at your clothes, your hair, your work, and more
- Behaving erratically and making 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
- Pick up on your fears, 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 or giving you the silent treatment

Emotionally abusive people act superior. Some examples include:

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

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

- Controlling who you see or spend time with including friends and family
- Checking your 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 you
- Treating you like a possession or property
- Criticising or making fun of your friends, family and work colleagues
- Using jealousy and envy as a sign of love and to keep you from being with others
- Controlling the finances

Emotional abuse can take a number of different forms, including:

- Accusations of cheating or other signs of jealousy and possessiveness
- Constant checking or other attempts to control the other person's behaviour
- Constantly arguing or opposing
- Criticism
- Isolating the individual from their family and friends
- Name-calling and verbal abuse
- Refusing to participate in the relationship
- Shaming or blaming
- Silent treatment, withholding affection and attention
- Playing down the other person's concerns

It is important to remember that these types of abuse may not be apparent at the beginning of a relationship. A relationship may start with the appearance of being normal and loving, but abusers may start using tactics as the relationship progresses to control and manipulate their partner.

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. The consequences of emotional abuse are just as severe as those from physical abuse.

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

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 depression and anxiety and physical problems such as stomach ulcers, heart palpitations, eating disorders and insomnia.

Dealing with Emotional Abuse

The first step in dealing with an emotionally abusive relationship is to recognise the abuse. If you are 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 some strategies for reclaiming your life that you can put into practice today.

Make Yourself a Priority. When it comes to your mental and physical health, you need to make yourself a priority. Stop worrying about pleasing the person abusing you. Take care of your needs. Do something that will help you think positively 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. Firmly tell the abusive person that they may no longer shout 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 behaviour. 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 set 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 wrong with you. But you are not the problem. So stop blaming yourself for something you have no control over.

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.

Avoid Engaging. 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.

Build a Support Network. Although it can be tough to tell someone what you are going through, speaking up can help. Talk to a trusted friend, family member, or health care professional 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 people you trust will help you feel less lonely and isolated. They also can 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.

If however, your partner is willing to address their behaviour and make changes, this is something that may be able to be addressed and worked on in therapy.

Depending on your situation, you may need to take steps to end the relationship. Each situation is different. So, discuss your thoughts and ideas with those you trust. Remember too, that abuse can escalate to physical abuse and violence, when the person being abused makes a decision to leave. So, be sure you have a safety plan in place should the abuse get worse.

Have contact numbers or web addresses. Find the numbers and web addresses of support services that you may want to contact and be aware of how to ask for help if you feel unsafe.

If you are in immediate danger always call 999. If you are using a mobile and are in a situation and cannot speak:-

- listen to the questions from the operator –
- respond by coughing or tapping the handset if you can
- press 55 when prompted by the operator.

By pressing 55 the operator knows you need help and will connect you to police.

If you are experiencing domestic abuse you can ask for ANI (Action Needed Immediately) at any pharmacy counter.

Useful contacts

Lancashire Victim Services - 03003230085. Refuge - 24 hour helpline 08082000247.

Men's Advice Line 08088010327. Safenet.org.uk – Domestic abuse services and refuge in the North West.