



## **What is emotional abuse?**

*“Emotional abuse can be defined as any nonphysical behavior that is designed to control, intimidate, subjugate, demean, punish or isolate another person through the use of degradation, humiliation or fear.”* (From: The Emotionally Abusive Relationship – Beverly Engle)

This article is designed to give you the tools to identify emotionally abusive patterns in your life...and give you a way out...a way to cope...a way to love yourself and others in your life...every moment of every day.

Patricia Evans in her book: “The Verbally Abusive Relationship” points out that most emotional and verbal abuse can be very difficult to recognize and sometimes goes on without notice.

Evans points to some of the reasons verbal and emotional abuse can seem elusive, these include:

1. Mostly, verbal abuse is secretive. Usually only the partner of the abuser hears it.
2. Verbal abuse becomes more intense over time. The partner becomes used to and adapted to it.
3. Verbal abuse takes many forms and disguises
4. Verbal abuse consistently discounts the partner’s perception of the abuse.

Evans includes “Categories of Verbal Abuse” in her book. I include the list below followed by their definitions:

1. Withholding
2. Countering
3. Discounting
4. Verbal abuse disguised as jokes
5. Blocking and diverting
6. Accusing and blaming
7. Judging and criticizing
8. Trivializing
9. Undermining
10. Threatening
11. Name calling

12. Forgetting
13. Ordering
14. Denial
15. Abusive Anger

1. **Withholding**: a choice to keep virtually all of one's thoughts, feelings, hopes and dreams to one's self and to remain silent and aloof towards one's partner. More subtle signs of withholding might be: pretending not to hear; picking up something while your partner is talking; being 'busy' in some activity and saying: "go ahead, I'm listening".
2. **Countering**: denying the other persons reality; arguing against the other person's thoughts, feelings, perceptions and experiences. An abuser who consistently counters seems to often have the opposite opinion of their partner.
3. **Discounting**: denying the reality and experience of the partner; includes either denying or distorting the partner's perception of the abuse itself. Some examples include: "you're too sensitive"; "you blow everything out of proportion."
4. **Verbal abuse disguised as jokes**: disparaging the partner crassly or with wit and style. They normally sound sarcastic and are demeaning to the partner.
5. **Blocking and diverting**: controlling the communication by establishing what can be discussed, or withholding information. Blocking can be accusatory, calling attention to the partner and eliciting a defensive response. Blocking can also be accomplished thru diversionary tactics, switching topics is very common; often the partner is unaware that the original topic is no longer the topic, they have been diverted.
6. **Accusing and blaming**: accusing the partner of some wrongdoing, whether actual, implied or dreamed up.
7. **Judging and criticizing**: expressing judgment, lack of acceptance or criticism; expressed through words and/or tone and gesture. Some examples include: statements that begin with "the trouble with you is \_\_\_\_\_"; statements that begin with "your problem is \_\_\_\_\_". Most "you" statements or judgmental, critical and abusive. Sometimes judgment and criticism are disguised as advice: "wouldn't it be better if"..."next time you should"... always connoting a right/wrong-good/bad tone.
8. **Trivializing**: saying or implying that the partner's words, deeds or expression is insignificant, silly, doesn't matter; or doesn't matter much. Trivializing can be very subtle, learning the partner feeling depressed and frustrated without knowing why.

9. **Undermining**: showing disinterest or offering oppositional responses to emotional sharing. It is often part of other forms of abuse- trivializing, discounting, and denying. It may also look like changing the subject or simply walking out of the room while the partner is talking.
10. **Threatening**: manipulation by bringing up a partners greatest fears.
11. **Name calling**: one of the most overt categories of abuse. All name calling is abuse, period. Terms of endearment are not name calling unless said in a hostile/sarcastic tone.
12. **Forgetting**: forgetting tasks, promises, commitments. A form of passive-aggressive behavior that involves both denial and manipulation (often unconscious).
13. **Ordering**: giving orders; in essence denying the equality and autonomy of the partner. Some examples are: “Get rid of this”; “We won’t discuss it”; “Shut that off”; “we are going to the party”.
14. **Denial**: denying the reality of the partner. Denying things they may have said or did when it is clear that they said and/or did them.
15. **Abusive Anger**: lack of warmth from your partner; verbal abuse, irritable outbursts, sneers, argumentativeness, temper tantrums, shouting, yelling, raging, explosiveness and sarcasm directed at you or others. Evans devotes an entire chapter to “abusive anger” entitled “The Anger Addict”.

I began the article with this quote from – Beverly Engle author of: “The Emotionally Abusive Relationship.”

*“Emotional abuse can be defined as any nonphysical behavior that is designed to control, intimidate, subjugate, demean, punish or isolate another person through the use of degradation, humiliation or fear.”*

Engle speaks with compassion about how we are all at some point guilty of using emotionally abusive tactics with our partners from time to time... along with our own personal responsibility to end the madness of emotional abuse. :

*“We are all guilty of using emotionally abusive tactics on our partners from time to time.”* (p. 19).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I agree, in part. We have all grown up in a society where co-dependent emotional patterns are the norm. SO, yes, unless we do the work to CHANGE these patterns, we all do use these patterns with our partners from time to time. In her book: “The Verbally Abusive Relationship”, Patricia Evans supports this: “Verbal abuse is, in a sense, built into our culture. One-upmanship, defeating, putting down, topping,

This does not excuse our behavior! Instead, it points us all in the direction of becoming responsible for our words and actions and to do our part to stop the pain and drama. Engle refers to our role in an abusive relationship when she says:

*“Instead of blaming and shaming those who have become abusive, I believe it is far more important to take responsibility for your behavior and changing your behavior.”* (p. 23)

It’s not their fault, at first:

Emotionally abusive people didn’t get that way on purpose, they grew up in families and environments that fostered such behavior.

As Engle points out:

*“First of all, those who become emotionally abusive often do so unintentionally and unconsciously instead of deliberately and maliciously.”*

Engle offers her own list of overt and covert examples of emotional abuse that include:

More overt examples of emotional abuse in intimate relationships:

- Humiliation and degradation
- Discounting and negating
- Domination and control
- Judging and criticizing
- Accusing and blaming
- Trivial and unreasonable demands or expectations
- Emotional distancing and the “silent treatment”
- Isolation

More covert or subtle forms of emotional abuse are:

- Withholding of attention or affection
- Disapproving, dismissive, contemptuous, or condescending looks, comments and behavior
- Sulking and pouting
- Projection and/or accusations
- Subtle threats of abandonment (either physical or emotional)

Emotional abuse is rampant in our culture: in our families, our work environments and even in our schools. Sure, there's the obvious stuff: name calling, criticism, contempt,

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countering, manipulating, criticizing, hard selling and intimidating are accepted as fair games by many. When these power plays are enacted in relationship and denied by the perpetrator, confusion results.

etc... But there's a lot of 'abuse' that goes on that is often condoned, some so subtle is it invisible to the casual onlooker... but its there.

Emotionally abusive people didn't get that way on purpose, they grew up in families and environments that fostered such behavior.

As a [relationship coach](#) I'm hired from both victims of emotional abuse and perpetrators... that's right. There are folks now that are becoming conscious of their role in perpetuating abuse learned from their families and want it to stop. I commend them all, each and every one because not only are they becoming the loving human beings they want to be...but they're also ending generations of dysfunctional communication... they are leaving love as their legacy to their children, their grandchildren, and generations to come. They are in fact, changing the world... and I love them all!

The article has pointed to many definitions of emotional abuse in an effort to help you identify the signs in your life... and to make a difference for yourself, your children and all those you love.

*Enjoy the impact you have on your world with the actions you take...every moment of every day!*

*Call or write- I can help:*

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