

How to Recognize the Signs of Family Violence/ Emotional Abuse

Overview

You probably know many of the more obvious signs of mental and emotional abuse. But when you're in the midst of it, it can be easy to miss the persistent undercurrent of abusive behaviour.

Psychological abuse involves a person's attempts to frighten, control, or isolate you. It's in the abuser's words and actions, as well as their persistence in these behaviours. The abuser could be your spouse or romantic partner. They could be your business partner, parent, or a caretaker. No matter who it is, you don't deserve it and it's not your fault. Continue reading to learn more, including how to recognize it and what you can do next.

Humiliation, negating, criticizing

These tactics are meant to undermine your self-esteem. The abuse is harsh and unrelenting in matters big and small.

Here are some examples:

- **Name-calling.** They'll blatantly call you "stupid," "a loser," or words too awful to repeat here.
- **Derogatory "pet names."** This is just more name-calling in not-so-subtle disguise. "My little knuckle dragger" or "My chubby pumpkin" aren't terms of endearment.
- **Character assassination.** This usually involves the word "always." You're always late, wrong, screwing up, disagreeable, and so on. Basically, they say you're not a good person.
- **Yelling.** Yelling, screaming and swearing behaviours are designed to intimidate and make you feel small and inconsequential. It might be accompanied by fist-pounding or throwing things.
- **Patronizing.** "Aw, sweetie, I know you try, but this is just beyond your understanding."
- **Public embarrassment.** They pick fights, expose your secrets, or make fun of your shortcomings in public.
- **Dismissiveness.** You tell them about something that is important to you and they say it's nothing. Body language like eye-rolling, smirking, headshaking, and sighing help convey the same message.
- **"Joking."** The jokes might have a grain of truth to them or be a complete fabrication. Either way, they make you look foolish.
- **Sarcasm.** Often just a dig in disguise. When you object, they claim to have been teasing and tell you to stop taking everything so seriously.
- **Insults of your appearance.** They tell you, just before you go out, that your hair is ugly or your outfit is clownish.
- **Belittling your accomplishments.** Your abuser might tell you that your achievements mean nothing, or they may even claim responsibility for your success.
- **Put-downs of your interests.** They might tell you that your hobby is a childish waste of time or you're out of your league when you play sports. Really, it's that they'd rather you not participate in activities without them.

- **Pushing your buttons.** Once your abuser knows about something that annoys you, they'll bring it up or do it every chance they get.

Control and shame

Trying to make you feel ashamed of your inadequacies is just another path to power.

Tools of the shame and control game include:

- **Threats.** Telling you they'll take the kids and disappear, or saying "There's no telling what I might do."
- **Monitoring your whereabouts.** They want to know where you are all the time and insist that you respond to calls or texts immediately. They might show up just to see if you're where you're supposed to be.
- **Digital spying.** They might check your internet history, emails, texts, and call log. They might even demand your passwords.
- **Unilateral decision-making.** They might close a joint bank account, cancel your doctor's appointment, or speak with your boss without asking.
- **Financial control.** They might keep bank accounts in their name only and make you ask for money. You might be expected to account for every penny you spend.
- **Lecturing.** Belaboring your errors with long monologues makes it clear they think you're beneath them.
- **Direct orders.** From "Get my dinner on the table now" to "Stop taking the pill," orders are expected to be followed despite your plans to the contrary.
- **Outbursts.** You were told to cancel that outing with your friend or put the car in the garage, but didn't, so now you have to put up with a red-faced tirade about how uncooperative you are.
- **Treating you like a child.** They tell you what to wear, what and how much to eat, or which friends you can see.
- **Feigned helplessness.** They may say they don't know how to do something. Sometimes it's easier to do it yourself than to explain it. They know this and take advantage of it.
- **Unpredictability.** They'll explode with rage out of nowhere, suddenly shower you with affection, or become dark and moody at the drop of a hat to keep you walking on eggshells.
- **They walk out.** In a social situation, stomping out of the room leaves you holding the bag. At home, it's a tool to keep the problem unresolved.
- **Using others.** Abusers may tell you that "everybody" thinks you're crazy or "they all say" you're wrong.

Accusing, blaming, and denial

This behaviour comes from an abuser's insecurities. They want to create a hierarchy in which they're at the top and you're at the bottom.

Here are some examples:

- **Jealousy.** They accuse you of flirting or cheating on them.
- **Turning the tables.** They say you cause their rage and control issues by being such a pain.

- **Denying something you know is true.** An abuser will deny that an argument or even an agreement took place. This is called [gaslighting](#). It's meant to make you question your own memory and sanity.
- **Using guilt.** They might say something like, "You owe me this. Look at all I've done for you," in an attempt to get their way.
- **Goading then blaming.** Abusers know just how to upset you. But once the trouble starts, it's your fault for creating it.
- **Denying their abuse.** When you complain about their attacks, abusers will deny it, seemingly bewildered at the very thought of it.
- **Accusing you of abuse.** They say you're the one who has anger and control issues and they're the helpless victim.
- **Trivializing.** When you want to talk about your hurt feelings, they accuse you of overreacting and making mountains out of molehills.
- **Saying you have no sense of humor.** Abusers make personal jokes about you. If you object, they'll tell you to lighten up.
- **Blaming you for their problems.** Whatever's wrong in their life is all your fault. You're not supportive enough, didn't do enough, or stuck your nose where it didn't belong.
- **Destroying and denying.** They might crack your cell phone screen or "lose" your car keys, then deny it.

Emotional neglect and isolation

Abusers tend to place their own emotional needs ahead of yours. Many abusers will try to come between you and people who are supportive of you to make you more dependent on them.

They do this by:

- **Demanding respect.** No perceived slight will go unpunished, and you're expected to defer to them. But it's a one-way street.
- **Shutting down communication.** They'll ignore your attempts at conversation in person, by text, or by phone.
- **Dehumanizing you.** They'll look away when you're talking or stare at something else when they speak to you.
- **Keeping you from socializing.** Whenever you have plans to go out, they come up with a distraction or beg you not to go.
- **Trying to come between you and your family.** They'll tell family members that you don't want to see them or make excuses why you can't attend family functions.
- **Withholding affection.** They won't touch you, not even to hold your hand or pat you on the shoulder. They may refuse sexual relations to punish you or to get you to do something.
- **Tuning you out.** They'll wave you off, change the subject, or just plain ignore you when you want to talk about your relationship.
- **Actively working to turn others against you.** They'll tell co-workers, friends, and even your family that you're unstable and prone to hysterics.
- **Calling you needy.** When you're really down and out and reach out for support, they'll tell you you're too needy or the world can't stop turning for your little problems.

- **Interrupting.** You're on the phone or texting and they get in your face to let you know your attention should be on them.
- **Indifference.** They see you hurt or crying and do nothing.
- **Disputing your feelings.** Whatever you feel, they'll say you're wrong to feel that way or that's not really what you feel at all.

Codependence

A codependent relationship is when everything you do is in reaction to your abuser's behaviour. And they need you just as much to boost their own self-esteem. You've forgotten how to be any other way. It's a vicious circle of unhealthy behaviour.

You might be codependent if you:

- are unhappy in the relationship, but fear alternatives
- consistently neglect your own needs for the sake of theirs
- ditch friends and sideline your family to please your partner
- frequently seek out your partner's approval
- critique yourself through your abuser's eyes, ignoring your own instincts
- make a lot of sacrifices to please the other person, but it's not reciprocated
- would rather live in the current state of chaos than be alone
- bite your tongue and repress your feelings to keep the peace
- feel responsible and take the blame for something they did
- defend your abuser when others point out what's happening
- try to "rescue" them from themselves
- feel guilty when you stand up for yourself
- think you deserve this treatment
- believe that nobody else could ever want to be with you
- change your behaviour in response to guilt; your abuser says, "I can't live without you," so you stay

What to do

If you're being mentally and emotionally abused, trust your instincts. Know that it isn't right and you don't have to live this way.

If you fear immediate physical violence, call 000 or your local emergency services.

More:

- **Accept that the abuse isn't your responsibility.** Don't try to reason with your abuser. You may want to help, but it's unlikely they'll break this pattern of behaviour without professional counseling. That's their responsibility.
- **Disengage and set personal boundaries.** Decide that you won't respond to abuse or get sucked into arguments. Stick to it. Limit exposure to the abuser as much as you can.

- **Exit the relationship or circumstance.** If possible, cut all ties. Make it clear that it's over and don't look back.
- **Book in with Counsellor:** You might want to offload to a counsellor in individual counselling sessions. A therapist can show you a healthy way to move forward. If you think it will help, call Ghita who can help you in your recovery: 0439888070
- **Give yourself time to heal.** Reach out to supportive friends and family members.

Online Information Resources:

<https://www.healthline.com/health/signs-of-mental-abuse>

<https://campaigns.premiers.qld.gov.au/dfvsupport/>

<https://www.lifeline.org.au/crisis-chat/> Lifeline Australia: 13 11 14

Separation Mediation over Parenting Plans and Finances:

Leaving the relationship is more complex if you're married, have children, or have commingled assets. If that's your situation, seek legal assistance.

Bond University Law Clinic: Family Dispute Resolution: <https://bond.edu.au/about-bond/academia/faculty-law/dispute-resolution-centre/family-dispute-resolution-clinic>

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