Emotional Abuse

What is Emotional Abuse?

Abuse is any behavior that is designed to control and subjugate another human being through the use of fear, humiliation, and verbal or physical assaults. Emotional abuse is any kind of abuse that is emotional rather than physical in nature. It can include anything from verbal abuse and constant criticism to more subtle tactics, such as intimidation, manipulation, and refusal to ever be pleased.

Emotional abuse is like brain washing in that it systematically wears away at the victim’s self-confidence, sense of self-worth, trust in their own perceptions, and self-concept. Whether it is done by constant berating and belittling, by intimidation, or under the guise of “guidance,” “teaching,” or “advice,” the results are similar. Eventually, the recipient of the abuse loses all sense of self and remnants of personal value. Emotional abuse cuts to the very core of a person, creating scars that may be far deeper and more lasting than physical ones (Engel, 1992, p. 10).

Types of Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse can take many forms. Three general patterns of abusive behavior include aggressing, denying, and minimizing.

Aggressing

Aggressive forms of abuse include name-calling, accusing, blaming, threatening, and ordering. Aggressing behaviors are generally direct and obvious. The one-up position the abuser assumes by attempting to judge or invalidate the recipient undermines the equality and autonomy that are essential to healthy adult relationships. This parent-to-child pattern of communication (which is common to all forms of verbal abuse) is most obvious when the abuser takes an aggressive stance.

Aggressive abuse can also take a more indirect form and may even be disguised as “helping.” Criticizing, advising, offering solutions, analyzing, probing, and questioning another person may be a sincere attempt to help. In some instances, however, these behaviors may be an attempt to belittle, control, or demean rather than help. The underlying judgmental “I know best” tone the abuser takes in these situations is inappropriate and creates unequal footing in peer relationships.

Denying

Invalidating seeks to distort or undermine the recipient’s perceptions of their world. Invalidating occurs when the abuser refuses or fails to acknowledge reality. For example, if the recipient confronts the abuser about an incident of name calling, the abuser may insist, “I never said that,” “I don’t know what you’re talking about, “ etc.

Withholding is another form of denying. Withholding includes refusing to listen, refusing to communicate, and emotionally withdrawing as punishment. This is sometimes called the “silent treatment.”

Countering occurs when the abuser views the recipient as an extension of themselves and denies any viewpoints or feelings which differ from their own.

Minimizing

Minimizing is a less extreme form of denial. When minimizing, the abuser may not deny that a particular event occurred, but they question the recipient’s emotional experience or reaction to an event. Statements such as “You’re too sensitive,” “You’re exaggerating,” or “You’re blowing this out of proportion” all suggest that the recipient’s emotions and perceptions are faulty and not to be trusted.

Trivializing, which occurs when the abuser suggests that what you have done or communicated is inconsequential or unimportant, is a more subtle form of minimizing.

Denying and minimizing can be particularly damaging. In addition to lowering self-esteem and creating conflict, the invalidation of reality, feelings, and experiences can eventually lead you to question and mistrust your own perceptions and emotional experience.

Understanding Abusive Relationships

No one intends to be in an abusive relationship, but individuals who were verbally abused by a parent or other significant person often find themselves in similar situations as an adult. If a parent tended to define your experiences and emotions, and judge your behaviors, you may not have learned how to set your own standards, develop your own viewpoints, and validate your own feelings and perceptions. Consequently, the controlling and defining stance taken by an emotional abuser may feel familiar or even comfortable to you, although it is destructive.

Recipients of abuse often struggle with feelings of powerlessness, hurt, fear, and anger. Ironically, abusers tend to struggle with these same feelings. Abusers are also likely to have been raised in emotionally abusive environments and they learn to be abusive as a way to cope with their own feelings of powerlessness, hurt, fear and anger. Consequently, abusers may be attracted to people who see themselves as helpless or who have not learned to value their own feelings, perceptions, or viewpoints. This allows the abuser to feel more secure and in control, and avoid dealing with their own feelings and self-perceptions.

Understanding the pattern of your relationships, especially those with family members and other significant people, is a first step toward change. A lack of clarity about who you are in relationship to significant others may manifest itself in different ways. For example, you may act as an “abuser” in some instances and as a “recipient” in others. You may find that you tend to be abused in your romantic relationships, allowing your partners to define and control you. In friendships, however, you may play the role of abuser by withholding, manipulating, trying to “help” others, etc. Knowing yourself and understanding your past can prevent abuse from being recreated in your life.

Are You Abusive to Yourself?

Often we allow people into our lives who treat us as we expect to be treated. If we feel contempt for ourselves or think very little of ourselves, we may pick partners or significant others who reflect this image back to us. If we are willing to tolerate negative treatment from others, or treat others in negative ways, it is possible that we also treat ourselves similarly. If you are an abuser or a recipient, you may want to consider how you treat yourself. What sorts of things do you say to yourself? Do thoughts such as “I’m stupid” or “I never do anything right” dominate your thinking? Learning to love and care for ourselves increases self-esteem and makes it more likely that we will have healthy, intimate relationships.

Basic Rights in a Relationship

If you have been involved in emotionally abusive relationships, you may not have a clear idea of what a healthy relationship is like. Evans (1992) suggests the following as basic rights in a relationship for you and your partner:

The right to good will from the other.

The right to emotional support.

The right to be heard by the other and to be responded to with courtesy.

The right to have your own view, even if your partner has a different view.

The right to have your feelings and experience acknowledged as real.

The right to receive a sincere apology for any jokes you may find offensive.

The right to clear and informative answers to questions that concern what is legitimately your business.

The right to live free from accusation and blame.

The right to live free from criticism and judgment.

The right to have your work and your interests spoken of with respect.

The right to encouragement.

The right to live free from emotional and physical threat.

The right to live free from angry outbursts and rage.

The right to be called by no name that devalues you.

The right to be respectfully asked rather than ordered.

What Can You Do?

If you recognize yourself or your relationships in this brochure, you may wish to:

Educate yourself about emotionally abusive relationships. Two excellent resources include:

Engle, Beverly, M.F.C.C. The Emotionally Abused Woman: Overcoming Destructive Patterns and Reclaiming Yourself. New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1992.

Evans, Patricia. The Verbally Abusive Relationship: How to Recognize It and How to Respond. Holbrook, Massachusetts: Bob Adams, Inc., 1992.

Consider seeing a mental health professional. A counselor can help you understand the impact of an emotionally abusive relationship. A counselor can also help you learn healthier ways of relating to others and caring for your own needs.