

VERBAL & EMOTIONAL ABUSE

Victory Over Verbal and Emotional Abuse

"You're worthless!" "You'll never amount to anything!" "I wish you had never been born!" Words like these in childhood can wound the heart for a lifetime.

And further wounding takes place in adulthood when "control" is the name of the game. Threats like, "If you leave me, I'll hurt the children!" or "I've taken the keys—you're not going anywhere!" are both emotionally and verbally abusive and are ways of maintaining control in relationships.

Abuse can also be perpetrated without a word—whether with degrading looks, obscene gestures, or threatening behaviors. These actions inflict immense pain and impede emotional growth. You don't have to allow an abuser to make you feel worthless. Jesus says that God not only knows each and every sparrow, but He also knows you intimately and considers you to be of great worth.

Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies?
Yet not one of them is forgotten by God.
Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all
numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth
more than many sparrows."
(Luke 12:6-7)

DEFINITIONS

WHAT IS Emotional Abuse?

Emotional abuse is the unseen fallout of all other forms of abuse: physical, mental, verbal, sexual, and even spiritual abuse. People often minimize the importance of emotions. Yet with deeply wounded people, their feelings can be the driving force behind their choices, the life-sustaining element of their very beings. Emotional abuse strikes at the very core of who we are, crushing our confidence, wearing away our sense of worth, crushing our spirit. The Bible says,

"A cheerful heart is good medicine,
but a crushed spirit dries up the bones."
(Proverbs 17:22)

► **Emotional abuse** is any ongoing, negative behavior used to control or hurt another person. Emotional abuse ranges from consistent indifference to continual belittling of character.

All forms of abuse—emotional, verbal, mental, physical, spiritual, and sexual—damage a person's sense of dignity and God-given worth.

All forms of abuse wound the spirit of a person and, therefore, are emotionally abusive. Proverbs, the book of wisdom, says, "A crushed spirit who can bear?" (Proverbs 18:14)

- **Emotional abuse** or "psychological mistreatment" scars the spirit of the one abused.

The damage from emotional abuse lasts far longer than damage from any other kind of abuse. A broken arm will soon heal; a broken heart takes much longer.

After extended periods of emotional abuse, many victims lose hope, feeling that life is not worth living.

"Hope deferred makes the heart sick."
(Proverbs 13:12)

- **Emotional abuse** can be passive-aggressive.

Passive-aggressive abuse is a means of indirect, underhanded control; hence, the term is *passive-aggressive*.

Passive-aggressive abusers express their anger through nonassertive, covert behavior. In an attempt to gain covert control, they often use manipulation as a means of placing themselves in a position of dependence. Then, with underlying anger, they become faultfinders of the people on whom they depend.¹

Victims of passive-aggressive people feel perplexed and dismayed at being the target of punitive and manipulative behaviors.

Friends of passive-aggressive abusers often become enmeshed in trying to comfort or console them in response to their claims of unjust treatment and their inability to handle life on their own.

Passive-aggressive abusers need to recognize and resolve their very real anger and take to heart God's warning:

"Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools."(Ecclesiastes 7:9)

- **Emotional abuse** can be either overt or covert rejection.²

Overt rejection conveys the message that a person is unwanted or unloved (as when one is belittled as a child).

Covert rejection takes place in subtle ways that may or may not be intended to cause harm by the perpetrator (as when one is ignored as a child).

Biblical Example

Both Overt and Covert Rejection: Tamar
(Read 2 Samuel chapter 13.)

► **OVERT REJECTION:**

Tamar, daughter of King David, was raped by her half brother Amnon and then was openly and blatantly despised and shunned by him.

► **COVERT REJECTION:**

Their father, King David, indirectly rejected Tamar by failing to execute justice on her behalf when he refused to hold Amnon accountable for his sin against Tamar. David, in essence, let his son off the hook by totally ignoring the sexual violation of his daughter.

QUESTION: "What does the Bible say about emotional abuse?"

ANSWER: The Bible doesn't use the term "emotional abuse," but it does instruct us as to how we are to treat one another. The Bible details numerous attitudes and actions we should have toward each other. If we follow these guidelines we will never be abusive toward anyone:

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."
(Philippians 2:3-4)

WHAT IS Verbal Abuse?

Verbal abuse is a form of overt, emotional abuse. A skilled woodsman wields his weapon carefully, chopping repeatedly on a precise spot until the targeted tree falls. This lumberjack takes pride in controlling himself and his weapon, never striking a careless blow. Likewise, a verbal abuser uses his tongue as a weapon to hack away at another person. This abuser is skilled in his ability to strike a blow—wielding words that caustically cut heart and soul.

"You love every harmful word,
O you deceitful tongue!"
(Psalm 52:4)

Verbal abuse is the systematic, ongoing use of harmful words or a sharp tone in an attempt to control or dominate another person.

Abuse means mistreatment: the destructive misuse of something or someone.

Verbal abuse is always destructive.

"Your tongue plots destruction; it is like a sharpened razor, you who practice deceit."
(Psalm 52:2)

Verbal abuse injures the feelings of others with reviling, insulting, or contemptuous words.

The Hebrew word for revile is *gadaph*, from a root word that means "cut" or "wound."³ Jesus said, *"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me."* (Matthew 5:11)

Verbal abuse often seeks to injure the reputation of others, using tactics such as backbiting, barbs, or belittling talk, and strategies such as slander, slurs, and lies.

"You love evil rather than good, falsehood rather than speaking the truth." (Psalm 52:3)

WHAT IS Brainwashing?

Many prisoners of war have succumbed to brainwashing—an effective tactic used in psychological warfare. This term refers to a systematic, forcible indoctrination that puts pressure on prisoners to relinquish their beliefs and accept opposing beliefs. Unfortunately, you don't have to be in a prisoner of war camp to be brainwashed. Your captor could be a significant member of your own family or a new set of acquaintances. In whatever circumstance brainwashing occurs, the damage can be devastating, systematically wearing away your sense of self-worth and confidence, causing you to distrust yourself and even to lose touch with reality.

"Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may be zealous for them." (Galatians 4:17)

Tactics Employed by Those Who Brainwash Others

► Verbal Brainwashing

- **Intimidation**—Implying that your failure to comply with all demands or to adopt all the abuser's attitudes or beliefs will result in severe consequences.
- **Indoctrination**—Repeatedly implanting messages contrary to your presently held values or beliefs.

- **Discrediting**—Belittling your "outside" family and friends who disagree with the abuser.
- **Degrading**—Engaging in name-calling, insults, ridicule, and humiliation.
- **Labeling**—Claiming that your thoughts are childish, stupid, or crazy.

"They do not speak peaceably, but devise false accusations against those who live quietly in the land." (Psalm 35:20)

► Emotional Brainwashing

- **Isolation**—Depriving you of all outside sources of emotional and social support.
- **Induced exhaustion**—Keeping you up late, interrupting your sleep, causing sleep deprivation, wearing you down physically or emotionally.
- **Excessive compliance**—Militantly enforcing trivial demands.
- **Ignoring**—Withdrawing emotional support but later denying the withdrawal.
- **Forgetting**—Intentionally failing to keep promises and agreements.
- **Exploiting**—Using you or someone close to you for selfish interests or gain.

"The enemy pursues me, he crushes me to the ground; he makes me dwell in darkness like those long dead. So my spirit grows faint within me; my heart within me is dismayed." (Psalm 143:3-4)

CHARACTERISTICS OF VERBAL & EMOTIONAL ABUSE

Words possess immense power. Through a word God created the world. Through The Word who was made flesh (John 1:14), God saved the world. Words can be life-giving as well as life-threatening; life giving by inspiring us to be all we were meant to be, and life-threatening by destroying our hopes and dashing our dreams. Ultimately, words move from being positive to being abusive when they hurt our hearts and harm our relationships. The Bible says,

"The tongue has the power of life and death." (Proverbs 18:21)

ARE YOUR Words Grievous or Gracious?

Words have the ability to build others up or to tear others down.

"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."
(Ephesians 4:29)

Words That Hurt

Attacking a Person's Identity

- You *are* inherently wrong.
- You *are* intrinsically bad.

Yelling

- "Shut up!"
- "You look awful."

Name-calling

- "You stupid idiot!"
- "You crazy fool!"

Insulting

- "You're worthless!"
- "You're disgusting!"

A Negative Picture of the Past

- "I wish you'd never been born."
- "I should have had an abortion."

A Negative Picture of the Present

- "You can't do anything right."
- "Get lost!"

A Negative Picture of the Future

- "You'll never amount to anything."
- "You're hopeless."

Words That Heal

Addressing a Person's Action

- You *did* something wrong.
- You *did* something bad.

Discussing

- "Please listen, we need to talk about ____."
- "Let's talk about what might be more appropriate for you to wear."

Casting a Vision

- "You are good at ____."
- "You have positive qualities."

Complimenting

- "Your life has tremendous value."
- "I can see areas where you have much appeal!"

A Positive Picture of the Past

- "I was glad the day you were born."
- "I knew God had a special purpose for you when you were born."

A Positive Picture of the Present

- "You do a lot of things right."
- "You'll always have a home in my heart."

A Positive Picture of the Future

- "God has a wonderful plan for your life."
- "God has a future filled with hope for you."

WHAT ARE Familiar Faces of Abuse?

Abuse wears many faces—faces as varied as the people who give it and receive it. Abuse can be subtle or blatant, quiet or loud, smooth or abrasive. But with all its differences, abuse is always either verbal or nonverbal in delivery, and it always deeply impacts your personal and social life.

"His speech is smooth as butter, yet war is in his heart; his words are more soothing than oil, yet they are drawn swords."

(Psalm 55:21)

Verbal Abuse

- Accusing
- "Advising" excessively
- Backbiting
- Badgering
- Bashing because of gender, race, or religion
- Belittling
- Betraying confidences
- Blame-shifting
- Brainwashing
- Breaking promises
- Bullying
- Complaining chronically about unjust treatment
- Controlling conversations
- Criticizing unjustly
- Degrading

- Demanding false confessions
- Demanding that unrealistic expectations be met
- Demeaning family members
- Denying that abuse ever occurred
- Denying that the abuse is wrong
- Destroying credibility
- Dictating orders
- Disgracing
- Gossiping
- Humiliating publicly
- Insulting
- Interrupting constantly
- Laughing at abusive behavior
- Lying or truth twisting
- Making fun of a person's fear
- Making negative comparisons to others
- Making racial slurs
- Minimizing what is wrong
- Mocking
- Name-calling
- Playing verbal mind games
- Reality switching
- Ridiculing
- Scapegoating
- Shaming publicly
- Slandering
- Speaking profanity
- Teasing publicly about sensitive areas
- Teasing that hurts the heart
- Terrorizing
- Threatening
- Threatening suicide in order to control
- Twisting Scripture
- Undermining other relationships
- Using coarse talk
- Using put-downs
- Using words as a way to deceive
- Violating the context of conversations
- Wounding with sarcasm
- Yelling/screaming

Non-Verbal Abuse

- Abandoning the family
- Abusing mentally
- Abusing spiritually
- Acting deceptively
- Acting overly suspicious
- Arriving late as a form of control
- Assaulting a person physically
- Being chronically irresponsible
- Being excessively jealous
- Betraying family, friends, coworkers
- Brandishing weapons
- Changing rules or expectations continually
- Committing adultery
- Damaging property
- Driving recklessly
- Embezzling company money

- Excluding others from the group
- Failing to validate feelings
- Favoring others
- Forcing an abortion
- Forcing sex or sexual perversion
- Giving condescending looks
- Giving excessive gifts to manipulate
- Giving sneering looks
- Giving unsolicited "help" to manipulate
- Hanging up the phone on someone
- Hiding things (car/house keys, money, jewelry important documents)
- Ignoring
- Interfering with another's work
- Interrupting another's sleep
- Intimidating physically
- Invading another's personal space
- Isolating from family
- Killing another's pet
- Making insulting gestures
- Making unwanted visits
- Manipulating children
- Monitoring another's phone calls
- Opening another person's mail
- Ostracizing
- Overindulging in order to control
- Playing cruel tricks

- Prohibiting another's decision making
- Prohibiting the positive friendships of others
- Prohibiting the private conversations of others
- Raping
- Refusing to leave when asked
- Refusing to listen
- Refusing to validate another's feelings
- Rejecting one's own child
- Slamming doors and drawers
- Stalking
- Stealing
- Sulking, pouting, "pity-parties"
- Threatening gestures
- Walking away as a power play
- Withdrawing emotionally
- Withholding deserved compliments
- Withholding deserved credit
- Withholding finances