

Emotional Abuse: Signs, Red Flags & How to Cope

Healthy relationships all share a few key elements: good communication, healthy boundaries, mutual respect, and support for one another. While these elements are extremely important, it's not always that simple. All relationships exist on a spectrum, from healthy to abusive to somewhere in between.

This article focuses specifically on emotional abuse. Unlike physical abuse, emotional abuse can be difficult to recognize. While it can be overt and obvious, it can also be subtle, and build gradually over time. While most common in dating and married relationships, mental or emotional abuse can occur in any relationship, including friends, family members, and co-workers.

What is Emotional Abuse?

Emotional abuse is often associated with criticism, embarrassment, shame, blame or other emotionally manipulative behavior. A relationship is emotionally abusive when there is a consistent pattern of behaviors that have a profound effect on the self-esteem and emotional health of those on the receiving end. With emotional abuse, the pattern of behaviors involves the element of control. Control can look like isolating someone from their friends and loved ones, discrediting their opinions and views, or silencing them altogether, creating an atmosphere where they are fearful, or lose faith in their independent viewpoints.

Over time, victims can begin to doubt their perceptions and reality. The behavior can be minimized as "not that bad". This can often perpetuate a vicious cycle wherein one feels unable to extricate themselves from a relationship that causes them emotional distress.

Identifying Red Flags for Emotional Abuse

If your partner, parent, co-worker, or friend engages in a pattern of any of these behaviors, it can be considered abuse. If you are having trouble discerning whether your relationship is abusive, think about how your interactions with this individual make you feel. If interactions consistently create feelings of frustration, confusion, depression, anxiety, worthlessness, or anything similar, these are red flags.



- **Unrealistic Expectations:** An individual makes unreasonable demands, including expecting you to put everything aside to meet their needs, insists that you spend all your time together, expects that you share all their opinions, or criticizes you for not completing tasks according to their specific standards.
- **Invalidation:** Undermining and dismissing your reality and your needs by refusing to acknowledge your feelings, accusing you of being overly sensitive, or emotional, refusal to accept your opinions as valid, or suggesting that your perceptions of a situation are wrong.
- **Creating Chaos:** Drastic mood changes and sudden emotional outbursts, consistently starting arguments, and behavior that is emotionally unpredictable can make one feel as though they are “walking on eggshells” and need to suppress their own feelings to keep the peace.
- **Emotional Blackmail/Gaslighting:** Emotional blackmail or gaslighting occurs when someone uses your emotions as a tool for manipulation and control. This can include making someone feel guilty for expressing their feelings, using your fears or other known information to criticize or control behavior, denying or lying about an event of concern, and pointing the finger at others to avoid taking responsibility for their own actions.
- **Superiority:** Those who are emotionally abusive often act superior and entitled. Treating you like you are inferior, behaving in a condescending manner, acting as if they are always right, and insisting that your opinions and ideals are wrong, or illogical.
- **Isolating:** Isolation, either figuratively through “silent treatment”, or withholding affection, or physically distancing you from friends or other family, monitoring your text messages, email, or social media, or treating someone as if they are a possession or property.

Emotional Abuse vs. Normal Conflict

There is some conflict in all relationships. Verbal disagreements and arguments are common occurrences. In fact, everyone has the right to a different opinion from their partner. In a healthy relationship, communication is key. When partners communicate effectively, they can understand each other better which can serve to make a relationship stronger. When they can resolve conflicts successfully, they develop a healthy, mature relationship. But, while conflict is normal, it can also be a sign that parts of the relationship aren't working.

Tips for Coping with Emotional Abuse

The first step in dealing with an emotionally abusive relationship is to recognize that it's happening. If you are able to identify any aspect of emotional abuse in your relationship, it is important to acknowledge, as this is the first step in beginning to take control of your emotional health.

- **Make Yourself a Priority:** Try making a conscious effort to stop worrying about pleasing others. Take care of your needs. Do something that will help you think positively and affirm who you are. Start with basic self-care. What makes you feel relaxed? Empowered? Try incorporating more of these things into your day.
- **Establish Boundaries:** This can seem difficult if one is wrapped up in a cycle of abuse, but it starts with small steps. Assert your feelings using “I statements”, such as, “I don't feel comfortable with you

speaking to me that way". A boundary can also be choosing to walk away and not engage in a non-productive verbal conflict.

- **Avoid Self-Blame:** For those that have been in an emotionally abusive situation for any length of time, it is common to start taking the blame for all the difficulties in a relationship. Know that this is not the truth. If you notice self-blaming thoughts as they are happening, change your inner dialogue, and engage in positive self-talk. Get a change of scenery by taking a walk, call a supportive friend. This can help re-train the brain to engage in a healthier thought process. If you are a victim of abuse, it is not your fault.
- **Making Yourself Smaller Will Not Change the Cycle:** Remind yourself that you cannot control someone else's actions, and no amount of acquiescence will decrease abuse. What we can control is how we choose to respond to it.
- **Avoid Engaging:** Do not engage with an abusive person. In other words, if an abuser tries to start an argument with you, insults you, or demands things from you, do not try to make explanations, soothe their feelings, or make apologies for things you did not do. Walk away from the situation if you can.
- **Build a Support Network:** It's incredibly difficult to tell someone that you are going through emotional abuse but speaking up can help. Talk to a trusted friend, family member, or even a counselor 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. A healthy support network can help with feelings of loneliness and isolation and make an enormous difference in our own self-worth.

Planning Ahead and Accessing Support

If you are evaluating your relationship, and have questions or need support, please reach out for help. Support can come from a trusted friend, a family member, or a licensed counselor. Resources are available that can also provide confidential support, for help navigating emotions, and keeping you safe, including a plan to exit a relationship.

Exit/Safety Planning

Emotionally abusive behavior will eventually take its toll, mentally and physically. Depending on your situation, you may need to take steps to end the relationship. Sometimes, emotional abuse can escalate to physical abuse if a decision is made to leave a relationship. A safety plan is a personalized, practical plan to improve your safety if you are experiencing abuse, preparing to leave an abusive situation, or after you leave. This plan includes information tailored to your unique situation and will help you prepare for and respond to different scenarios, including telling your friends and family about your situation, coping with emotions, and various other resources that can help ensure your safety. See below resources for more information about safety planning.

If you or a loved one are a victim of domestic violence, including emotional abuse, contact the [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#) at **1-800-799-7233** for confidential assistance from trained advocates.

Crisis Text Line provides free, 24/7 support for those in crisis. Text 741741 any time to connect with a crisis counselor, or visit www.crisistextline.org

[Interactive Safety Planning Online](#)

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